

**PUIRT-A-BEUL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MOUTH
MUSIC IN CAPE BRETON**

HEATHER SPARLING

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in
partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
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by **HEATHER LEE SPARLING**

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University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

Puirt-a-beul (pronounced *poorsht-uh-bee-uhl*), or “mouth music” as they are known in English, are generally defined as a Gaelic vocal song genre sung to accompany dance in the absence of instruments. In actual fact, however, puirt-a-beul are used for a variety of reasons within Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Although puirt-a-beul originated in Scottish Gaelic culture, this thesis is primarily an ethnographic study of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. It is based on participant-observation as well as twenty-eight interviews conducted in Toronto and Cape Breton January-August 1998.

Beginning with a review of the literature, I explore the definitions of puirt-a-beul put forth by Gaelic scholars, song collectors, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists; their assertions regarding the origins, history, use, and value of puirt-a-beul are also summarized. Even though Cape Breton contains the largest number of Scottish Gaelic speakers outside of Scotland, and despite the increasing fascination Scots have for Cape Breton Gaelic culture, the existing literature almost exclusively focuses on puirt-a-beul in Scotland. Gaelic scholars have generally sought a convergent, single explanation of puirt-a-beul’s origin and function within their own work rather than consider the contradictions, disjunctures, and uncertainties to be found not only amongst ethnographic consultants, but amongst the Gaelic scholars themselves.

In this thesis, the reality of puirt-a-beul for each of a number of diverse Cape Breton consultants is explored. “Portraits” of consultants familiar with and/or active in Cape Breton Gaelic culture provide the context in which various opinions were expressed.

Interviews are analyzed, and issues including origin theories, performance concerns, purpose, transmission processes, singers' genders, and attitudes towards puirt-a-beul are all considered. Disjunctures and discrepancies among consultants and even within a given interview are considered important indicators of cultural activity and means of self-definition.

For those familiar with Gaelic culture, puirt-a-beul might seem an odd, if innocuous, choice of research subject. There are many other Gaelic song types which are considered much more culturally important. However, this thesis reveals that the very "unimportance" of puirt-a-beul is important to understanding how Cape Breton Gaels position themselves in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two years ago, I embarked on the quest to discover what puirt-a-beul are and mean in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. “How hard can this be?” I thought. “I’ll read a few books, conduct a few interviews, and write a 150 page thesis.” Many books, interviews, and more than 300 pages later, my thesis was finally completed. I encountered many dead ends, contradictions, controversies, and academic lessons along the way. My research did not always run smoothly, but it was always interesting and I feel that in the process of learning about Gaelic culture and ethnomusicology, I have grown as a person.

I am an outgoing, social person by nature so perhaps it is not surprising that I felt drawn to ethnography. I thought I had prepared myself for the rigors and complexities of interviewing and analysis prior to starting my fieldwork. However, I quickly discovered how much I had yet to understand. I am very grateful to my consultants for their patience and generosity. They made time for me – despite the fact that I was sometimes little more than a stranger! – and opened their homes to me. Sincere thanks are extended to: Janet Buchanan, Sandy Cameron, Margo Carruthers, Stephanie Conn, Jackie Dunn, Mary Jack Gillis, Neil John Gillis, Mary Jane Lamond, Kay MacDonald, Donald MacDonnell, Frances MacEachen, Anna MacKinnon, Peter Jack MacLean, Duncan MacLellan, Rhodena MacLellan, Beth MacNeil, Jamie MacNeil, Maxie MacNeil, Rhoda MacRitchie, Rosemary McCormack, Patricia Murray, “FW,” and Seumas Watson.

In addition, some of my consultants helped me to further my knowledge of Gaelic. Jeffrey MacDonald taught me Gaelic while I was in Cape Breton. Catriona Parsons was my teacher during the Gaelic College's immersion week and she also taught me a number of Gaelic songs through choir rehearsals and workshops. Christine Primrose taught me Gaelic songs at the Piping College in Summerside, Prince Edward Island. David Livingston-Lowe has been my Gaelic teacher and mentor in Toronto for two and a half years. I am grateful to each of them for bringing the beauty and vitality of the Gaelic language into my life and for having faith in my ability to learn it.

I was very lucky to be able to access the Special Collections at St. Francis Xavier University. Thanks to Jane Gorman, who helped me find the materials I sought, and to Maureen Williams, who suggested resources with which I was not yet familiar. Maureen also went beyond the call of duty by arranging for me to receive K.N. MacDonald's *Puirt-a-Beul* through a York interlibrary loan before I even met her.

Cape Breton is a region that not only enjoys the reputation of being beautiful, but also of being one of the most friendly and hospitable places in Canada. This was proven to me by Roddie C. and Helen MacNeil, otherwise known as my "Mom and Dad MacNeil," who invited me to live with them for the summer. They made room for me, a complete stranger, even though one of their six children was getting married and the entire MacNeil clan came home for the event. They supported my work, provided me with feedback, and -- most importantly -- befriended me. A few typed words of acknowledgement, such as this, can never express the depth of my gratitude and love.

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particularly through a reading group that convened regularly through 1999. Special thanks go to Marcia Ostashewski and Sherry Johnson for all the times they discussed my work with me and offered suggestions.

My mother, Louise Sparling, and my sister, Penny, had to put up with many verbal overviews of my thesis progress, whether excited or -- more often -- frustrated and also helped to edit parts of the final work. Finally, thanks to Chris McDonald, who -- for some inexplicable reason -- always knew that I could do this. Amazingly, you were right.

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THE STORY OF PUIRT-A-BEUL

The King of *Tir-bho-Thonn* ('Land under Wave') had a daughter called *Binne-Bheul* [Musical Mouth], so called because of her virtuosity in singing *puirt-a-beul*. And in the joy of her wedding morning she commenced this kind of song. *Agus bha na puirt cho bin agus cho blasda* -- 'and the *puirt* were so sweet and eloquent.' And there was a great giant (*famhaire mòr*), who was a sore affliction to the fishermen and crofters of the Western Isles, destroying their nets, etc. And when he heard the music of Binne-Bheul he began to dance. And it is told that he began to dance early in the morning, and by mid-day he was dancing so powerfully and leaping so high that he leapt past the Coolins of Skye and past the Coolins of Rum, and by evening he was far out in the Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the Isle of Lewis, and he dancing so powerfully! And Binne-Bheul kept on, so happy was she on her wedding-night, and the more she sang the more the giant danced. And at last ... he became so exhausted that he lay down, near St Kilda, and was drowned. And he was no more trouble to the fishermen nor the crofters of the Isles.

From Ó Madagáin 1989:32

Based on the story told by Hugh MacRae, collected by James Ross

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

One of the most significant moments of Canadian Celtic music was a result of the commercial success of fiddler Ashley MacIsaac's "Sleepy Maggie," released in 1994. Sung by Mary Jane Lamond and fusing traditional Celtic tunes with 1990s hard rock, "Sleepy Maggie" was a surprising hit, mainly because it is sung in Scots Gaelic. In fact, one of the Gaelic songs included in "Sleepy Maggie" is of the type known as *puirt-a-beul* (pronounced *poorsht-uh-bee-uhl*) in Gaelic, or "mouth music" in English.

This thesis is about *puirt-a-beul* in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where both Ashley MacIsaac and Mary Jane Lamond currently live. Generally defined as dance music sung in the absence of instruments, *puirt-a-beul* are a lively type of music with silly, funny, bawdy, or nonsensical lyrics. I learned my first *port-a-beul* (singular spelling of *puirt-a-beul*) in my initial year of Gaelic language lessons. Since then, I have been taught several in more advanced Gaelic classes and in workshops. *Puirt-a-beul* sets can be found on most recordings that include Gaelic songs, whether they are produced in Scotland or Cape Breton (*puirt-a-beul* do not exist in Ireland). But despite the popularity of *puirt-a-beul* in Scottish Gaelic communities, scholars have had surprisingly little to say about this song type.

While it is true that most publications concerning Gaelic song describe *puirt-a-beul* in various degrees of detail, the focus is on its ontological definition, its cultural essence. Gaelic scholars have generally sought a convergent, single explanation of *puirt-*

a-beul's origin and function. In this thesis, the reality of puirt-a-beul for each of a number of diverse Cape Breton consultants is explored. A multitude of opinions about puirt-a-beul have been sought, since each person's understanding of it is contingent upon individual circumstances, such as the consultant's age, gender, Gaelic fluency, musical knowledge, and stake in the Cape Breton Gaelic tradition.

It became apparent that puirt-a-beul are a locus of contention within Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Cape Bretoners' attitudes towards puirt-a-beul were intriguingly varied. Some fluent Gaelic speakers were disinterested in puirt-a-beul and others felt that puirt-a-beul threatened other parts of the Gaelic song corpus. On the other hand, some Cape Breton Gaelic learners and singers have embraced puirt-a-beul, using it as a cultural entry point.

I originally wanted to explore Cape Breton Celtic dance music in a broader sense, starting with puirt-a-beul. However, once I stumbled upon the controversy surrounding puirt-a-beul, the direction of my research was set. I decided to focus on Cape Breton—rather than Scotland—for a number of reasons. First, Cape Breton has been under-represented in Gaelic song scholarship. Second, as a Canadian, I wanted to study music of my own country. Finally and more pragmatically, as a Masters student with limited financial resources and limited time, I felt that Cape Breton was more accessible than Scotland.

Clearly, it is easy to justify the study of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton based on my own interest, educational goals, and methodology. However, is there a *need* for this study? That is less easy to determine. Spradley argues that

one way to synchronize the needs of people and the goals of ethnography is to consult with informants to determine urgent research topics. Instead of beginning with theoretical problems, the ethnographer can begin with informant-expressed needs, then develop a research agenda to relate these topics to the enduring concerns within social science. Surely the needs of informants should have equal weight with “scientific interest” in setting ethnographic priorities (1979:14).

I can hardly claim to have responded to an overt wish to have Cape Breton puirt-a-beul studied. On the contrary, some of my consultants expressed surprise that I had decided to study such an insignificant song type. Others were less direct, simply dismissing puirt-a-beul when asked about the topic, or changing the subject.

In a forthcoming article, Margaret Myers explains how she questioned her research on European Ladies’ Orchestras since she had heard so many negative things about them. She wondered, “did I really want to spend years of my life rooting about in what seemed on balance to be a subject of depressing mediocrity? Wouldn’t it be more merciful just to let sleeping dogs lie?” (in press: 2000). While I wondered the same about puirt-a-beul, my concerns were augmented by ethical and personal considerations: would I be more culturally responsible if I were to study another, less contentious Gaelic song type? Was I prepared to accept negative comments regarding my research from my consultants?

Fortunately, one consultant wrote that she was thrilled “to be part of this culturally significant document” and that she was glad that I had seen “the need” for such

a project (Carruthers, personal communication, May 12, 1999). Another was doubtful of my ability to find any puirt-a-beul amongst the native Gaelic speakers of Cape Breton because of their dislike for the genre, but he then acknowledged that an examination of negative attitudes could be as illuminating as an exploration of positive ones (fieldnotes, June 8, 1998). Rod MacNeil, with whom I lived while in Cape Breton, was not particularly interested in puirt-a-beul at first but later told me that at least my research was revealing how certain types of music disappear from the Gaelic tradition (fieldnotes, July 14, 1998). And while no one directed me to puirt-a-beul specifically, I heard many complain of a lack of Gaelic resources and wishes for more thorough studies of Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

1.1 Literature review

The first step in my research was to read as much as possible about puirt-a-beul. However, it quickly became apparent that puirt-a-beul were rarely granted more than cursory attention: “As historians of all categories know, anomalies and devalued categories tend to slip through the theoretical meshes of traditionally constructed historical nets” (Margaret Myers, in Diamond and Moisala, forthcoming). Furthermore, most published discussion of puirt-a-beul related to their existence in Scotland, ignoring their place in Cape Breton. In addition, many contradictions about puirt-a-beul, both between writers and within single works, emerged. These publications are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

1.2 Ethnographic Interviews in Toronto

Unable to go to Cape Breton until after my first eight months of MA courses, I began by interviewing Torontonians who were familiar with Gaelic song, particularly in Cape Breton. At the same time, I wanted an understanding of Gaelic song in Scotland for comparison, particularly since Cape Breton Gaels are almost all direct descendants of nineteenth century Scottish Gaelic immigrants. I chose consultants I had met through Gaelic language lessons, Gaelic language and song workshops, and the Toronto Gaelic Society.

Interview questions were prepared in advance and memorized. No notes were referred to during interviews, nor were any taken. I wanted the interviews to approximate natural conversation as much as possible. I also did not want to miss anything said or any non-verbal cues. However, the tape recorder was always visible and accessible to my consultants. They were free to turn it off at any time. Consultants were informed of the nature of my research and the purpose for the interview at the beginning and their verbal consent for being recorded was obtained.

I avoided referring to the comments made by other consultants in each interview since I was concerned that consultants would be influenced by them. Once consultants made an initial response to a question, I occasionally mentioned differing responses in order to encourage discussion and debate. Had multiple interviews been conducted with each

consultant, I would have checked their comments with other consultants for clarification and accuracy.

1.3 Archival Research

To supplement my literature review and ethnographic interviews, several archives were searched for information about puirt-a-beul. I began with Helen Creighton's Gaelic song collections at the Museum of Civilization and the Public Archives of Nova Scotia since I had been told that she had an interest in puirt-a-beul. While this did not appear to be the case, in the process, I discovered a number of Gaelic song recordings that included sets of puirt-a-beul.

The Gaelic Folklore Project housed at St. Francis Xavier University and the university library's Special Collections proved very helpful. Hundreds of puirt-a-beul field recordings collected by John Shaw from different consultants in the late 1970s were accessible. Unfortunately, there are no translations and two years of Gaelic lessons were not enough to transcribe the lyrics, let alone understand them. I was not able to obtain permission to make a copy of the collection either. In addition, the collection does not include contextual information such as how informants learned puirt-a-beul or when they might be sung. Still, I was able to make a copy of the project's index (which I later used to jog consultants' memories of their personal puirt-a-beul repertoires) and make some observations about the general structure and rhythm of puirt-a-beul.

The Special Collections offered the opportunity to look through rare books unavailable in Toronto, such as Gaelic song and fiddle collections, Gaelic newspapers, magazines and journals, recordings, and theses. Between the Nova Scotia Gaelic Folklore Project and the Special Collections, I had a much better sense of the variety and types of Gaelic songs which I might encounter in Cape Breton, and the context in which puirt-a-beul are situated.

The above three archives were all consulted before my arrival in Cape Breton. The fourth archive, the Beaton Institute at University College Cape Breton in Sydney, was consulted close to the conclusion of my fieldwork. There I found several theses about fiddling traditions in Cape Breton as well as a number of brochures, proposals, reports, and musical scores that shed light on puirt-a-beul and Cape Breton Gaelic culture in general.

1.4 Ethnographic Interviews in Cape Breton

My Toronto consultants provided me with the names of potential consultants in Cape Breton. I learned of others while conducting archival research at St. Francis Xavier University. One consultant who was recommended by several people was Roddie C. MacNeil. I was fortunate to meet him early in my fieldwork and during my subsequent interview with him, he invited me to stay with him and his wife for the summer. Rod, as a Gaelic speaker and singer, knew many Gaelic singers in Cape Breton. He introduced me to a number of them, and suggested others.

As much as possible, I tried to meet the people I wished to interview before I set up an appointment. Although I did make a few “cold calls”—some of which yielded useful interviews—some people refused. I also found it extremely stressful and uncomfortable to request interviews of people I did not know. At the same time, I felt that if I were to be academically responsible, I had to interview as many people as possible, from as many different backgrounds as possible. Eventually, however, despite knowing that there were more people I could usefully interview, I stopped scheduling interviews. I felt that cold calls were placing undue stress upon me and that the consequent interviews were less helpful anyway, likely because I had not established a relationship with these consultants. As a result, responses were more guarded. Furthermore, I felt less able to prepare for interviews with people I did not know.

Sometimes well-meaning friends called people whom they felt would be good consultants and set up interviews for me. I was uncomfortable refusing these gestures of friendship and confidence in my research. I also believed that these friends might indeed know a good potential consultant better than I. However, these interviews were generally the least successful, mostly because these consultants had not thought much about *quirt-a-beul* and therefore had little to say in response to my questions. As with cold calls, these consultants seemed unwilling to speak as freely as my other consultants without some sort of an established relationship between us.

1.5 Participant-Observation in Cape Breton

It was not enough for me to ask about puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton; I also wanted to see and participate in them for myself. While in Cape Breton, I attended a variety of events in order to discover the general context in which puirt-a-beul are learned and sung. I took Gaelic lessons twice a week for six weeks through *Fèis an Eilein*. I attended different concerts and festivals held throughout Cape Breton. I went to a number of ceilidhs and milling frolics and participated in several workshops related to either Gaelic song or step dancing (for descriptions and explanations of these terms, see Chapter 3). Some of these events I knew because of events listings provided by Cape Breton Tourism. Other events I learned of from the people I met in Cape Breton.

Fieldnotes were composed almost daily on my laptop in my room at the MacNeils'. I preferred typing these entries to making quick notes in the field because I was able to spend time considering my experiences in the privacy of my room; I was also able to spend time writing detailed notes, feelings, impressions, and theories, instead of jotting down the occasional word. I understand that I am not alone among ethnographers in the desire to write in a private space. James Clifford describes such writing as “a turning *away* from dialogue and observation toward a separate place of writing, a place of reflection, analysis, and interpretation” (1990: 52).

Notes were not taken in the field for a number of reasons. I did not wish to call attention to myself as a scholar; I preferred to participate in a manner similar to all other participants. Additionally, I feared missing something if I took notes in the field. I did

not want to remove myself from the action in order to write something down. While I risked forgetting some details when attempting to recall them at a later time, it is possible that I learned more from full rather than partial participation.

I am sensitive to Clifford's complaint that ethnographers tend to keep their fieldnotes to themselves: "they are intimate records, fully meaningful—we are often told—only to their inscriber" (1990: 52). Therefore, I have made the effort to include some of my fieldnotes in my analysis of *puirt-a-beul* (Chapter 6). However, to include a substantial portion of my fieldnotes would make my thesis tediously long. Furthermore, for all that my trip to Cape Breton was ostensibly for thesis research, it was a personal experience as well. No matter how many fieldnotes I include, the reader could never truly understand my motives and mistakes since the reader has not lived the same life as I and therefore, I feel justified in keeping many of my fieldnotes private.

1.6 Consultant Dialogic Feedback

All consultants were told that they were being recorded and that their interviews were being used for research purposes for my Masters degree. They all agreed that this was acceptable. At the time of my fieldwork, I did not know how I would eventually structure my thesis, and I therefore did not know that I would create "portraits" of my consultants based on their interviews with me (cf. Chapters 4 and 5). However, once the portraits were completed, I sent them back to my consultants for feedback. I wrote an accompanying letter and explained the purpose of my thesis, its structure, and how their

portraits would fit in. I invited feedback and clarification and requested that they respond within two weeks. At the same time, they were encouraged to submit changes and comments beyond those two weeks since I intend to continue with this line of research in the future. Each consultant was provided with a postage-paid return envelope, as well as my phone number and e-mail address, in case they preferred not to write me in return.

The responses to the portraits varied. While the majority of my consultants were satisfied with them, others expressed concerns. My general feeling about those who were upset was that they had not realized that they might be quoted extensively. They requested that their portraits be edited in various ways, which I did. But while I felt it was ethically responsible to solicit and act upon feedback from my consultants with respect to their individual portraits, I did not offer them the opportunity to comment on the conclusions I drew from their interviews in Chapter 6. I felt that this section should remain solely under my own control, as the conclusions drawn are my own, based on my academic training and personal experiences in the field.

1.7 Thesis Structure

In consultation with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jay Rahn, it was agreed that individual “portraits” of my consultants would best demonstrate their varied backgrounds and divergent opinions, while granting equal weight to each consultant (Chapters 4 and 5). I chose to allow my consultants to speak for themselves as much as possible, using extensive direct quotes. Additional commentary was used to clarify statements, as

necessary, and to highlight important points. Comparisons and conclusions were reserved for Chapter 6.

In an essay about gender and music relations in Prince Edward Island (in press, 2000), Beverley Diamond divides her work into two halves:

In part one, my search for pattern and conjuncture is presented with a somewhat distanced voice of authority, one which draws on a wide range of external sources to validate the experiential patterns revealed in my consultants' stories. Fragments of many stories are used in a way which erases individual personalities and interventions. On the other hand, in part two, the search for motion and disjuncture is presented with more of the 'I was there' voice intact. Not all of the disjunctures which emerge in this section are interpreted, or at least not fixed in their interpretation (in press: 2000).

The portraits highlight personalities and differences. No effort was made to smooth over or ignore inconsistencies or contradictions with other consultants. In Chapter 6, fragments of interviews are used to bring my consultants' voices together, highlighting patterns but also allowing disjunctures to remain. The purpose of this thesis is not to present a definitive meaning of puirt-a-beul but rather, to explore the various meanings ascribed to puirt-a-beul by Gaelic Cape Bretoners. Contradictions often revealed consultants' desires for, fears about, concerns regarding, and overall understanding of Gaelic culture.

The portraits are presented in the chronological order in which I interviewed my consultants so that the reader can follow my personal path of discovery. Although the reader obviously cannot precisely follow my experiences and exploration of puirt-a-beul, the conclusions drawn about puirt-a-beul are a result not only of the information I acquired in each interview, but also the order in which I acquired that information. Each

consultant's comments had an effect on the types of questions subsequent consultants were asked as well as on my understanding of their answers. By presenting their portraits in chronological order, I hope to increase the reader's understanding of my own perspective.

At the same time, in order to keep my thesis focused on puirt-a-beul, some interviews were omitted from the portrait chapter, generally because these interviews provided more general cultural information rather than information specifically relevant to puirt-a-beul. Interview outlines are included in Appendix B. Nevertheless, relevant comments from these interviews are incorporated in Chapter 6. Thus, there are "gaps" in the presentation of consultants' portraits. However, I still believe that a chronological presentation of my interviews is more informative than any other presentation option.

Unfortunately, due to the linear nature of academic writing, it is impossible for the reader to understand fully how participant-observation and ethnographic interviews intertwined to create my own unique understanding of puirt-a-beul. The reader is provided with contextual information regarding Cape Breton Gaelic culture (Chapter 3) before the portraits chapter so that the reader will understand references made by my consultants. In actual fact, my understanding of Cape Breton Gaelic culture evolved over the entire course of my fieldwork and, due to the limited duration of my fieldwork and my status as a cultural outsider, is unavoidably only partial. Clifford similarly emphasizes that "the process of field research is potentially endless. One can never have

enough conversations, learn the language well enough, grasp all the ‘hidden’ and emergent domains of indigenous life” (1990:67).

Considering time, academic, ethical, and financial constraints, however, I have attempted to provide an overview of puirt-a-beul that is both broad and deep. Breadth is achieved by the use of a wide variety of source material, including a substantial number of interviews, recordings, scholarly and popular sources, and personal experience. Detailed discussion of individual interviews provides depth, supplying the context in which specific comments about puirt-a-beul were made.

As already mentioned, my first exploration of puirt-a-beul began with a comprehensive literature review. Even at this early stage, contradictions between writers were apparent. As well, the generally cursory nature of discussions of puirt-a-beul in the literature suggests divergent attitudes toward the genre. In the next chapter, seminal works are examined for their portrayals of puirt-a-beul. Their comments formed the basis of my knowledge regarding puirt-a-beul. Based on the information they presented, interview questions were formulated; my expectations of what I would later find in Cape Breton were already being shaped.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

Puirt-a-beul are a Scots Gaelic song genre. According to Dwelly's *Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*, "puirt-a-beul" translate as "mouth tunes" although they are more commonly referred to in English as "mouth music." Dwelly goes on to define puirt-a-beul as "an accompaniment to a dance used when a musical instrument is not available." He also equates it with "diddling," the articulation of a tune through the improvisatory use of vocables, somewhat analogous to "scat" singing in jazz. The obvious difference between diddling and puirt-a-beul is that while the former is improvisatory, the latter always involve fixed, and often comprehensible, lyrics. The lyrics are often highly repetitive, generally of a silly nature, and sometimes consisting of nonsensical vocables.

Dòmhnall beag an t-siùcar
An t-siùcar, an t-siùcar
Dòmhnall beag an t-siùcar
Is dùil aige pòsadh.

Little Donald of the sugar
Of the sugar, of the sugar
Little Donald of the sugar
He expects to marry.

Cha gabh a'chlann-nighean e
'Chlann-nighean e, 'chlann nighean e
Cha gabh a'chlann-nighean e
Bho nach eil e bòidheach.

The girls won't have him
The girls, the girls
The girls won't have him
Since he's not handsome.

Example 1: Predominantly lexically meaningful lyrics¹

¹ "Meaningful" here pertains to actual Gaelic words as opposed to vocables. Whether the overall sense of the lyrics is meaningful or not is another matter.

Dòmhnall Beag an t-Siùcair



Chorus: Dòmhnall beag an t-siù - cair, an t-siù - cair, an t-siù - cair,



Dòmhnall beag an t-siù - cair, is dùil aig - e pòs - adh.



Verse: Cha ghabh a' chlann nigh-ean e, chlann nigh-ean e, chlann nigh-ean e;



Cha ghabh a' chlann nigh-ean e bho nach eil e bòidh - each.

Bodachan a' Mhìreìn



Bod - ach - an a' mhìr - ein, a' mhìr - ein, a' mhìr - ein;



Bod - ach - an a' mhìr - ein, a' bhonn-aich bhig 's a' ghràinn-ein;



Bod - ach - an a ri ar o, a ri ar o, a ri ar o,



Bod - ach - an a ri ar o, a' bhonn-aich bhig 's a' ghràinn-ein.

Bodachan a'mhirein,
A'mhirein, a'mhirein,
Bodachan a'mhirein,
A'bhonnaich bhig 's a'ghràinnein.

Little old man with the little piece
Little piece, little piece
Little old man with the little piece
With the little piece, the little
bannock and the little grain.

Bodachan *a ri ar o*
A ri ar o, a ri ar o
Bodachan *a ri ar o*
A'bhonnaich bhig 's a'ghràinnein.

Little old man *a ri ar o*
A ri ar o, a ri ar o
Little old man *a ri ar o*
With the little piece, the little
bannock and the little grain.

Example 2: Lyrics containing *vocables*

Many puirt-a-beul tunes remain a part of the fiddle and pipe tune repertoire. Puirt-a-beul are well known in both Scotland, from which many Scottish Gaels emigrated during the nineteenth century to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where. Hundreds of puirt-a-beul have existed (see Appendix A for a partial list of titles). It is therefore surprising that so few have been recorded, musically and textually.

2.1 Gaelic Song Scholarship of Scotland and Canada

In this section, I abstract works from my bibliography that were important contributions to nearly one hundred years of Gaelic song scholarship. Prior to the twentieth century, most Scottish musical publications were collections; although some were of songs, many focused on instrumental tunes. Several instrumental tune collections remain a part of current Cape Breton fiddle repertoire: Gow's *Collection of Strathspey Reels* (six collections, 1784-1822), Skinner's *Twelve New Strathspeys and*

Reels (1865), Robertson's *Atholl Collection* (1865), and MacDonald's *Gesto Collection* (1895) and *Skye Collection* (1897) are examples.

In 1892, the annual Scottish National Mòd was inaugurated. The purpose of the Mòd was to promote and preserve Gaelic song from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Shortly thereafter, Gaelic song scholarship came into its own, peaking in the twenty-five years between 1955 and 1980 with such works as *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (M.F. Shaw 1955), "A Classification of Gaelic Folk-Song" (Ross 1957), *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (Creighton and MacLeod 1964), *Hebridean Folksongs* (Campbell and Collinson 1969-1981), *Beyond the Hebrides* (Fergusson 1977), and *From the Farthest Hebrides* (Fergusson 1978). Fergusson makes one brief reference to puirt-a-beul in his introduction to "Comic Songs and Satires" (1978:235). Furthermore, while I identified seven possible puirt-a-beul, only two are directly labelled as such (1978:241 and 255). In *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, Shaw dedicates a whole section to puirt-a-beul; however, she does not mention puirt-a-beul once in her introduction. In fact, even though Shaw labels puirt-a-beul as "vocal dance music," all her references to dancing indicate that it was always accompanied instrumentally (cf. 1977 [1955]:7 and 16).

The only monograph devoted solely to puirt-a-beul was written at the earliest stage: K.N. MacDonald's *Puirt-a-Beul* (1901), a collection of tunes and lyrics. This influential work still remains one of the largest collections of puirt-a-beul. Two scholars, Andrew Mackintosh and Alexander MacDonald, familiar with K.N. MacDonald's book,

wrote articles about puirt-a-beul in the 1910s and 1920s in *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*.

Some time passed until a scholarly interest in Scottish dance and Cape Breton Gaelic culture began to emerge: Frank Rhodes's article on Cape Breton step-dancing (1964), the Fletts' book on traditional dancing in Scotland (1964), Helen Creighton's collection of Gaelic songs from Cape Breton (1964), and George S. Emmerson's book on Scottish dance music (1971). After Francis Collinson's seminal work, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, was published in 1966, another gap followed—broken only by a series of articles by Dr. Alan Bruford (1978-1979) in *Folk Review* (an odd resource since the articles are scholarly in nature but the magazine is not)—until recent interest in Gaelic language and its effects on Gaelic musical culture ensued. Jackie Dunn, a Cape Breton fiddler, wrote a B.A. thesis on the connections between fiddling and the Gaelic language (1991) which includes a substantial section on puirt-a-beul. John Shaw wrote an article in *Scottish Language* on the same topic (1992).

Reference works, such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* do not allude to puirt-a-beul. *The New Companion to Scottish Culture* (1993) and *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1994) only mention puirt-a-beul in passing. However, a useful introduction to the topic of puirt-a-beul may be garnered from *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), under Collinson's entry "Scotland: Folk Music: Gaelic Song," although it is based upon his much earlier description of puirt-a-beul (1966; to be discussed later in this chapter).

Using these works, the definition of puirt-a-beul in scholarly publications is explored in this chapter, including a consideration of how much discussion (and what kind) has been accorded puirt-a-beul and a comparison of puirt-a-beul descriptions in Canada and Scotland. It will be clear that there is considerable disagreement and uncertainty regarding the origins, history and purpose(s) of puirt-a-beul. Furthermore, it will become apparent that Cape Breton Gaelic song culture is under-represented in such studies as exist on Scots Gaelic song. This literature review will reveal the need for a closer examination and exploration of puirt-a-beul, which motivated the present work.

K.N. MacDonald, author of *Puirt-a-Beul*, produced such important fiddle tune collections as *The Skye Collection* (1887) and *The Gesto Collection* (1885), both of which continue to be used as references by Cape Breton fiddlers today. It is therefore surprising that his collection of puirt-a-beul is no longer well known in Cape Breton. Originally published in 1901, it was reprinted in 1931, presumably due to its popularity as “the authority when the question of published tunes is in consideration” (1931: iii), although the publishers lament that MacDonald was “not spared” to make necessary revisions (1931: iii). Therefore, despite “many blemishes in the original work” (1931: iii) (which, since unidentified, are seriously problematic), the book remained much as it did in its original printing. Any differences between editions remain unidentified. It is possible that both Frances Tolmie’s contributions and newly composed verses to “Sud mar chaidh an càl a dholaidh” by Calum MacPhàrlain (1931:iii) were made to the 1931 edition although this is not clear.

The book consists of 143 examples of puirt-a-beul. The music is in Curwen notation and while the lyrics are included, they are separated from the music, making it sometimes difficult to comprehend how the words fit with the tune. Aside from introductory and concluding remarks by MacDonald, the tunes are provided without commentary. MacDonald does not indicate puirt-a-beul's popularity or discuss variants in the texts and tunes. He does not furnish any information regarding how he collected them, where, or when. In fact, his publishers note contributions made by Frances Tolmie (1931: iii), a Gaelic song collector in her own right. Tolmie, born in Skye, was interested in collecting and preserving Gaelic songs and culture. A portion of her song collection was published in the *Folksong Society London Journal* (1910-1913). Tolmie's contributions are printed in the text without note (cf. page 22 of this chapter).

MacDonald's statements regarding the origins of puirt-a-beul are highly romanticised:

[Puirt-a-beul are] ancient dancing songs—relics of a bygone age—which have been floating about the Highlands of Scotland for many centuries ... they indicate the intensely musical nature of the Celts from a very early period, and before musical instruments were invented, or at any rate, known in this country [Scotland]. The Puirt-á-beul,² mouth-tunes, or dancing-songs, were evidently the first attempts at applying music to the art of dancing, or exhibitions of joy ... How many ages have elapsed since these dancing songs first originated must always remain a matter of conjecture, but in all human probability they are as old as the people and their language, of the earliest condition of which subjects written history has no record, and must forever remain silent.

At the same time this phase of the earliest signs of culture and civilisation has an intense interest for us, as it carries us back to an age so remote that we can only class it with other signs of the antiquity of man (1931 iv).

² Gaelic orthography is still in the process of being standardised and therefore accents are not always consistently used or of the same type.

MacDonald does not reinforce his assertions with sources. The oldest reference to a port-a-beul tune with which I am familiar is the appearance of *Tullochgorm* in the 1734 Young fiddle collection. However, it does not include any words, only the tune. MacDonald compares Gaelic culture to other oral cultures, such as pre-Classical Greek, in an effort to demonstrate the possibility (if not the likelihood) that puirt-a-beul have existed for centuries. MacDonald suggests that puirt-a-beul were created communally in some distant past; there is no sense of how individuals once composed (and perhaps continue to compose) puirt-a-beul. Nor does MacDonald suggest how puirt-a-beul have changed over time, whether in terms of music, lyrics, or function.

Without preamble, MacDonald jumps to a discussion of “canntaireachd,” a syllabic melodic system used to teach and refer to bagpipe tunes vocally. MacDonald notes that canntaireachd were the “first attempt to preserve articulate music” through vocables (1931: 50). MacDonald never explicitly connects canntaireachd with puirt-a-beul but he seems to suggest their association based on the use of vocables in each genre. The history of canntaireachd is at least partially documented and it is still in use today (see Collinson 1975, 157-164). Vowel sounds indicate pitch while consonants and extra syllables indicate the ornamentation required of the piper. However, my own studies do not suggest any correlation between puirt-a-beul and canntaireachd. Too many puirt-a-beul have words and furthermore, those vocables used in puirt-a-beul sound quite different than those used in canntaireachd (i.e. different consonants). Dr. Alan Bruford also argues against such a connection (1978: 7-8). Still, a study comparing puirt-a-beul

and canntaireachd vocables could reveal a connection (or lack thereof) more conclusively. Furthermore, vocables are clearly an important part of Gaelic music since puirt-a-beul, milling songs, lullabies and canntaireachd all make ample use of them (cf. Chapter 3.4.b and Appendix D). A deeper understanding of how vocables are deployed in Gaelic song could reveal general Gaelic musical values while more specifically revealing the origins and/or histories of each of the aforementioned Gaelic song types.

Perhaps the most interesting part of MacDonald's commentary is his acknowledgement that many people might not believe puirt-a-beul worth documenting because of their unpoetic nature (50). Although MacDonald quickly counters that puirt-a-beul are valuable for reasons beyond their poetic merits, such as their humour and "intensely human" nature (50), this negative attitude persists amongst Cape Breton Gaels today (cf. Chapter 6.6).

In the early 1910s, the Folk Song Society of London published Frances Tolmie's collection of Gaelic songs. Tolmie, born in 1840 on the Isle of Skye, became interested in learning as many Gaelic songs as possible while she was in her teens. Due to a shift in the social and political situation on the island, Gaelic songs were not sung as often as in her parents' youth (Tolmie 1910-1913:143). Tolmie met Alexander Carmichael (author and editor of *Carmina Gadelica*) several times over 1860-1862 and he encouraged her to make note of the songs she learned (Tolmie 1910-1913:144). In 1900, while visiting Carmichael, she was asked to write down all the songs she knew, which she did. She

claims that none are from books; rather, they were all learned in the field (Tolmie 1910-1913:146).

Tolmie also contributed a number of songs to K.N. MacDonald's *Puirt-a-Beul*. Although the exact songs are not indicated in *Puirt-a-Beul* itself (Tolmie's contributions are only noted briefly by the publishers), Tolmie specifies them in her own collection. Curiously, Tolmie only categorised one of the donated tunes as a port-a-beul; Tolmie categorised the other donations appearing in *Puirt-a-Beul* as lullabies (3), a waulking/milling song, and a rowing song. Why would Tolmie donate songs not of the puirt-a-beul genre to a collection devoted to puirt-a-beul? And why would MacDonald accept them and include them in his collection without clarification? There are no clear answers. From the outset of the study of puirt-a-beul, then, there were disagreements over the definition of puirt-a-beul. Differences of opinion regarding the nature and origins of puirt-a-beul were to recur throughout the century, involving even the most recent studies.

Not too long after the publication of *Puirt-a-Beul* and Tolmie's collection, Andrew Mackintosh and Alexander MacDonald wrote a series of articles in *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* (c. 1910s, 1916; and 1917, respectively). Mackintosh's articles present the lyrics (mostly Gaelic) known to be sung to well-known pipe and fiddle strathspeys and reels. Although the music is not notated, Mackintosh gives the English titles by which the tunes are known. Since most early music collections refer to tunes in English, this correlation makes it easier to trace and connect the relevant

tunes. Mackintosh describes the history of the tunes and any legends associated with them. He also occasionally clarifies an obscure reference in the texts. Mackintosh feels that it is worthwhile to study puirt-a-beul because “though fragmentary, they seem, more than any class of Gaelic literature, to carry with them a breath of the atmosphere of olden times, and give us vivid glimpses of customs and habits long since forgotten” (1916: 81).

Alexander Macdonald also correlates Gaelic lyrics with English tune names and is similarly interested in the “glimpses of old-world life in Gaeldom” which they reveal (1917: 95). However, rather than providing notes on each song’s history or meaning as does Mackintosh, Macdonald focuses on presenting several different lyrics associated with a particular tune, acknowledging the unfixed, changeable nature of puirt-a-beul. Clearly, puirt-a-beul varied depending on geographical location and according to time.

Mackintosh admires the ability of puirt-a-beul to survive: “[Puirt-a-beul] owe nothing to religion or superstition for their long life, for they are outside the domain of these powerful influences, and indeed outside the pale of one of them in one denomination for scores of years” (288). It is well-documented that Presbyterian ministers frowned upon dancing and instrumental music (as an enticement to dance) in the nineteenth century (cf. Carmichael 1900; Charles Dunn, 1953; Collinson, 1966). There are reports that ministers required their parishioners to burn their instruments. One legend posits that puirt-a-beul were developed at this time in order both to continue dancing and to preserve instrumental music (cf. Chapter 6.1.e).

In 1957 and 1961, *Scottish Studies* published two articles by James Ross: “A Classification of Gaelic Folk-Song” and “Folk Song and Social Environment: A Study of the Repertoire of Nan MacKinnon of Vatersay.” The former is a thorough and comprehensive categorisation of Gaelic song types (presented in Chapter 3.4). In Ross’s system, puirt-a-beul are classified according to structure, as opposed to theme, function, or folk aetiology (his other criteria). Ross claims that the purpose of puirt-a-beul is to facilitate the memorization of dance tunes, resulting in trivial texts. Ross explains that the *raison d’être* of puirt-a-beul

is melody and not a textual development of theme. They are characterized by a verbal repetitiveness which is not normally found in other songs and in a number of cases their vocal content is meaningless. Many of them simply present a visual image of a ludicrous kind with no element of narrative (1961:20).

However, “where the texts are sufficiently developed to have a definite content they are usually intended to be of a humorous kind” (1957:133). Surprisingly, although puirt-a-beul are associated with dance, Ross observes that “the actual description of any part of a dance [in the lyrics] is rare” (1961:21). Ross, like Alexander Macdonald, argues that any given puirt-a-beul tune may have several texts set to the same tune, generally as a result of “extensive local variation” rather than due to changes resulting from time or oral transmission (1957:133).

Ross accepts that puirt-a-beul evolved during the nineteenth century Presbyterian censure of instruments and secular song, but “it is unlikely, however, that the mouth-music was widely used as an accompaniment to the actual dance. Its origin is more likely to lie in the desire of instrumentalists to perpetuate their favourite tunes after the

destruction or banning of their instruments” (1957:133). In other words, puirt-a-beul were not created to substitute for instruments; rather, they originated as a means of preserving and recalling instrumental tunes. This would suggest that puirt-a-beul were originally intended as a temporary measure until instruments could once again be safely played.

Studies of Gaelic culture in Cape Breton—as opposed to Scotland—began to be published in the 1960s. Frank Rhodes, in an appendix to *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (1964), writes of dancing in Cape Breton. Unfortunately, Rhodes does not discuss dance music and as a result, he mentions puirt-a-beul only briefly. He does note, however, that after picnics, dancing occurred most often at “milling frolics” (275). “Milling,” known as “waulking” in Scotland, is the shrinking of wool. Neighbours gathered to beat the newly-woven cloth, accompanying themselves with milling (or waulking) songs. Although machines have made the activity obsolete, milling frolics continue to be held in Cape Breton for social reasons. My own consultants never suggested that people danced to the accompaniment of milling songs (cf. Chapter 3.4.n). Nonetheless, at least one of my consultants revealed that some dancing might be performed to puirt-a-beul after the labour, in celebration and in order to stretch out tired muscles (cf. Chapter 4.1).

Rhodes mentions one dance by the name of *Ruidhleadh nan Coileach Dubha* (The Black Cock’s Reel), performed by one of his informants “to her mother’s canntaireachd as a very young child” (270). In the absence of any documented or ethnographic account

of dancing accompanied by canntaireachd, and since there is a well-known port-a-beul known by the same name, it is possible that Rhodes or his consultant has mixed these genres up. If this is indeed the case, Rhodes's account is the first documentation of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton, and links the genre to dance.

Traditional Dancing in Scotland (1964), in which Rhodes's appendix appears, makes a few passing references to puirt-a-beul. The Fletts indicate two uses of puirt-a-beul. They suggest that they were sung to accompany children learning to dance at home (160). In addition, puirt-a-beul might be sung at a social dance for which no instrumentalists were available:

When young people were present at such a ceilidh [Gaelic for "gathering" or "visit"] there would generally be some dancing towards the end of the evening. Sometimes there would be a fiddler or piper to supply the music, or perhaps a melodeon-player. If no instrument were available, then someone would deedle [sic] the tune, or sing puirt-a-beul, the old Gaelic dancing-songs, often to the accompaniment of a Jew's harp or paper-and-comb (38).

The Fletts are alone in their claim that puirt-a-beul may have once been accompanied by an instrument, makeshift or otherwise. It does, however, make sense when one considers how difficult it would be to sing dance accompaniment without support (see Bruford 1978: 7). It is disappointing that the Fletts do not indicate what sort of circumstances might lead to the absence of an instrumentalist: was instrumental music frowned upon by religious leaders in the community? Were the musicians ever prevented from attending a ceilidh or other social event due to inclement weather? Was there no skilled instrument-maker nearby? The answers to these questions might go a long way towards explaining puirt-a-beul's multi-faceted existence in Gaelic culture.

In the same year as Rhodes's appendix appeared in *Traditional Dancing in Scotland*, Helen Creighton's and Calum MacLeod's volume of Gaelic songs from Cape Breton was also published (1964), widely recognised and owned by a number of my consultants. Intriguingly, it includes only one example of puirt-a-beul, "Sid mar Chaidh an Càl a Dholaidh" (248-250). An archival search of Creighton's materials at the Museum of Civilization (Ottawa) and the Public Archives of Nova Scotia (Halifax) revealed very few examples in her large field collection, although there are several examples of diddling or jigging.

It is clear from Creighton's notes and journals that she did not speak or understand Gaelic. She does not appear to have had a clear understanding of the Gaelic song genres contained in her collection. Helen Creighton's co-editor for *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, C.I.N. MacLeod, was a Gaelic immigrant from Scotland who taught at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, just outside of Cape Breton. It would not surprise me if MacLeod, with his Gaelic fluency and knowledge of Gaelic song (he is both published and recorded), had more editorial control than Dr. Creighton. Helen Creighton may have contributed little more than her collected materials.³

Because Creighton collected Gaelic songs without comprehending the language, it is likely that she allowed her informants to sing anything they wished to volunteer. From this perspective, it would appear that Cape Breton Gaels did not volunteer puirt-a-beul

³ Based on interviews with both C.I.N. MacLeod and Helen Creighton (1969-70), Dr. Carole Carpenter confirmed that Creighton provided the Gaelic song recordings and access to publication while MacLeod edited the work.

and this may be why they were not included in *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*. The question “why” then demands to be asked and is considered later (see Chapter 5.4, page 183). One wonders why when early Scottish scholars had accorded puirt-a-beul a reasonable amount of attention and when one recognises that puirt-a-beul remain popular in Scotland today (see, for example, interview with MacRitchie, and recordings by Mairi MacInnes, Catherine-Ann MacPhee, MacTalla, Mairi Smith, and Runrig).

According to Collinson in *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (1966), puirt-a-beul was a popular part of the Scottish media by 1966: “most people will have heard on the radio these Gaelic songs for providing, by vocal means, music for dancing; for the spectacle of dancing to mouth-music is now a common one on television” (Collinson 1966:93). Collinson discerns that the purpose of puirt-a-beul has changed over time. While it once accompanied dance, it is now showcased as entertainment.

Collinson, influenced by Ross’s articles of 1957 and 1961 and *Carmina Gadelica* (1900), suggests that puirt-a-beul “never seems to have been used *extensively* for the dance” (1966:93)—although they were “devised for dance” (98),—that puirt-a-beul are of relatively modern origins—although that is not “to deny that puirt-a-beul *could* have existed before either the pipes or the fiddle were invented,” (94)—and that puirt-a-beul are most likely the result of the nineteenth century Presbyterian suppression of secular music. Collinson states that puirt-a-beul do not use vocables as frequently as do the labour songs. Instead, puirt-a-beul have actual words, although they are “as a rule,

nonsensical, ludicrous, humorous or satirical” (1966:95), an observation of considerable relevance to my treatment of puirt-a-beul’s use and attitudes towards them (cf. Chapter 6.4 and 6.6).

Another Canadian scholar, George S. Emmerson, published *Rantin’ Pipe and Tremblin’ String: A History of Scottish Dance Music* in 1971, but there are no references to Cape Breton. Furthermore, it only glosses over the subject of puirt-a-beul, despite the relevance of puirt-a-beul to the monograph. Emmerson, who is familiar with K.N. MacDonald’s *Puirt-a-Beul*, is ambivalent regarding the origins of puirt-a-beul. On the one hand, Emmerson accepts that puirt-a-beul could have ancient origins. Citing Bruno Nettl’s *Music in Primitive Culture* (1956), Emmerson asserts that ethnomusicologists have found that “most primitive peoples seem to conceive of the words and melody of a song as an indivisible unit, are rarely able to differentiate between them and cannot ordinarily give either text or music alone without difficulty” (5). Emmerson concludes that “Puirt-a-beul ... [are] the product of a primitive impulse to associate all music with words, or rather, with uttered syllables, whether they make sense or not” (9). Of course, Alexander Macdonald’s indication that there are several sets of lyrics to various tunes suggests that text and tune are *not* indivisible (cf. page 23 of this chapter). On the other hand, Emmerson acknowledges that puirt-a-beul may have evolved from instrumental music: “The term mouth music is not used of song; it has the meaning of instrumental music made by the mouth and thus would appear to date from a period after the

introduction of instrumental music” (5). These contradictory assertions leave the reader stymied.

Emmerson is the only writer who argues that puirt-a-beul are used for both dancing and working (1971:7). Although there are labour-specific work songs, such as milling, milking, butter churning, and rowing songs, various consultants told me that they remembered hearing puirt-a-beul sung to accompany domestic chores by their mothers (see Chapter 6.2.a and 6.4.d). Emmerson, however, does not specify the type of labour puirt-a-beul might accompany.

Perhaps one of the most surprising sources of information on puirt-a-beul was a series of articles on Gaelic songs in *Folk Review* magazine, written by Dr. Alan Bruford, who was at the time a professor with the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. “Gaelic Lullabies, Laments and Mouth Music” (1978) provides a much needed comparison of puirt-a-beul with the Irish equivalent, called “porta béil” or “portaireacht.” Essentially, Irish *porta béil* is the same as the jigging described earlier, whereas Scottish puirt-a-beul involves fixed lyrics. Additionally, while Bruford acknowledges that puirt-a-beul may have accompanied dance, he argues that

in practice they were probably always predominantly what they are today, songs designed to exhibit the singer’s vocal agility—a few puirt-a-beul have five or six verses, but most have only one or two, and it would need not only a good memory but double-ended lungs and a rubber tongue to keep up the words for the length, say, of an eightsome reel; though supplemented with a bit of diddling and missing a beat now and then to draw breath, as singers have to, it might just be possible (1978:7).

Bruford's opinions regarding the origins of puirt-a-beul are somewhat vague, but unromanticised: "very often each verse and each refrain is sung twice over, just like the repeats in instrumental dances, ... this is [therefore] one indication that the mouth music must be copied from fiddle or pipe tunes rather than the other way about" (1979: 11).

Puirt-a-beul were not again part of academic discourse until 1991, when Cape Breton fiddler and step-dancer Jackie Dunn wrote her undergraduate thesis on the Gaelic "flavour" ("blas") of the Cape Breton fiddle sound. Dunn was the first to examine the possible connection between Gaelic language and musical style. Her study has resulted in inquiries from as far away as Scotland while UCCB (University College Cape Breton) Press has offered to publish it (Dunn interview). There are, perhaps not surprisingly, a number of difficulties with the thesis. Dunn's sources are rarely analysed in depth and her consultants' assertions are taken at face value. At one point Dunn argues that puirt-a-beul "were sung before they were ever played on instruments" (16) but only a few pages later, she notes that "the origin of mouth music is believed to be about the time of the Scottish Church's condemnation of all musical instruments (19th century)" (20) suggesting that puirt-a-beul were used to preserve and replace instrumental tunes until they could be reintroduced to instrumentalists at a later, safer date. Still, Dunn has brought a number of sources together and has offered some provocative starting points for further research.

One chapter is devoted to puirt-a-beul. Dunn claims that "it is common knowledge among the older generations that the first fiddlers in Cape Breton learned their

tunes from puirt-a-beul versions” (16). For Dunn (who is, after all, a fiddler), the primary role of puirt-a-beul is to transmit and identify fiddle tunes. The lyrics help a fiddler to remember a new tune perhaps heard only once before. The lyrics additionally help fiddlers to remember one particular tune within a large repertoire. Finally, Dunn argues that puirt-a-beul words help the fiddler to place musical accents appropriately, thereby performing the piece in its “correct” style (27-28). For Dunn, then, puirt-a-beul are not songs sung in the absence of instruments for the purpose of dancing. Rather, they are sung, often in the presence of instruments, as teaching and memory aids.

Shortly after Dunn’s thesis appeared, Dr. John Shaw published “Language, Music and Local Aesthetics, Views from Gaeldom and Beyond” (1992), which also explores the connection between Gaelic language and Cape Breton fiddle style by focusing on puirt-a-beul. Shaw agrees with Dunn that puirt-a-beul are used for tune identification and instruction, in a manner similar to (but not the same as) canntaireachd (44). In fact, Shaw believes that puirt-a-beul even occasionally go so far as to indicate instrumental ornamentation, as does canntaireachd (46).

Shaw also writes that, in Cape Breton, “it was common for people to step-dance to puirt-a-beul as well as instrumental music” (44). However, Shaw never discusses puirt-a-beul’s one-time place in women’s private sphere or its current place on the concert stage, in Gaelic language classes, and on commercial recordings. Clearly, however, Shaw is not alone in this oversight. From the first years of this century until the present day,

puirt-a-beul have been overlooked or oversimplified in scholarly accounts.⁴ Of course, the very multi-facetedness of puirt-a-beul—they could be both dance music and vocal song—makes them easy to overlook in studies of either genre.

British traditional music studies have tended to focus on either instrumental music or song, on either dance or dance music, rather than integrating the studies. This should already be clear from the works cited in this chapter but is further supported by referring to other books by Creighton (all song collections), Emmerson (all music collections), the Fletts (all dance studies), and other famous collectors of British song such as Sharpe and Child.

Although the differences of opinion respecting puirt-a-beul are occasionally striking, the fact that each scholar is writing from a different cultural perspective goes a long way towards explaining the reasons. For example, in Cape Breton where there are fewer than one thousand native Gaelic speakers remaining (despite current efforts to revive the language) and where fiddling is a way of life, puirt-a-beul offers a means of measuring a fiddler's "Gaelicness" in an otherwise non-linguistic musical form. In Scotland, where Highlanders were long stigmatized as barbarians and Gaelic has been considered a useless language, it is more important to prove the antiquity of Gaelic culture as a means of legitimizing and authenticating it.

⁴ The tendency to oversimplify puirt-a-beul is similar to the oversimplification of step-dancing in scholarly accounts. Step-dancing has been marginalised because its improvisational style is more difficult to describe and analyse than a standardised dance form. Since step-dancing and puirt-a-beul occur within the same culture – indeed, they are closely linked (cf. Chapter 6.4.a)—step-dancing scholarship may well reveal additional insights into puirt-a-beul.

Considering the limited resources describing Gaelic Cape Breton, it is necessary to explain the context in which puirt-a-beul is heard in Cape Breton. In the next chapter, a brief history of the Gaels in Cape Breton is presented as well as a depiction of the Gaelic communities still in existence. Various Gaelic venues (i.e. annual concerts, radio programs, language classes, community choirs, etc.) are described and the definition of a number of Gaelic song types is provided for comparative purposes.

CHAPTER THREE PROJECT BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

3.1 Project Background

After my third undergraduate year, I took a year off and lived in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was at this time that I first took Gaelic lessons (and, incidentally, learned my first port-a-beul). When I began my Masters, I was able to resume lessons in Toronto. As a dancer of a number of different styles (Irish ceili, Scottish country, Scottish ceilidh, Cape Breton step dancing, and Cape Breton square dancing), I considered studying dance music in Cape Breton. I started with puirt-a-beul, which I felt would be an interesting and feasible starting point, and it took on a life of its own.

While staying in the only hotel in Iona, I was talking on the phone in the lobby to a friend. The hotel proprietess, Sheila MacNeil, overheard me discussing my research. She told me that the hotel would be hosting a milling frolic demonstration for the hotel guests the following week and she invited me to come, which I did. At that milling frolic, I met a number of people whom I would later interview. There were six native Gaelic speakers at that event; amongst them was Roddie C. MacNeil, who graciously gave me his phone number.

I phoned Roddie from the campsite where I was living in a tent to ask if I might interview him. When he and his wife, Helen, heard that I had only a tent in which to spend the summer, they immediately offered me a place to stay which I did starting that very night, returning to the campsite to collect my tent the next day. I was extremely

grateful for a warm, dry room for, although it was June, the weather was damp and cold. Furthermore, my back was getting sore from sitting hunched over my laptop on the ground while typing my fieldnotes; now I even had a desk.

Through the summer, Rod, Helen and I had many conversations around their kitchen table, talking over tea, the omnipresent beverage in the MacNeil house. Rod offered me his opinions regarding *puirt-a-beul*, feedback on my research, and information based on his experiences and knowledge of Gaelic culture in Cape Breton. Helen taught me how to weave, and to cook traditional Cape Breton food (such as *maragan*). She also offered her support. My relationship with Rod and Helen—not to mention their children and grandchildren—was such that I was given a Clan MacNeil T-shirt at the end of the summer and they now sign their letters from “Mom and Dad MacNeil.”

I was additionally fortunate that I met Alice Freeman of Inverness within the first few days of my stay in Cape Breton, when I attended a Gaelic Day in Scotsville. Alice allowed me to stay at her house whenever I was conducting research in Inverness County. Since Mabou and Inverness were about a 45-60 minute drive from Iona, this helped me to reduce my travel time considerably. Alice, whose father was a Gaelic singer, also made suggestions regarding my research and was particularly helpful in directing me to potential consultants.

Many of my experiences in Cape Breton were a direct result of my involvement with Alice and Innis Freeman, and Rod and Helen MacNeil. All four ensured that I did not miss any important musical events, introduced me to Gaelic singers, and offered me

an “insider’s perspective” on my observations. I feel that my understanding of Cape Breton, while hardly comprehensive after only three months, was considerably deepened by the fact that I was able to look to native Cape Bretoners for information, guidance and support.

Despite all the help I received from various Cape Bretoners, it was not always an easy field trip, as mentioned in Chapter 1. My awareness that experiences of “outsiderness” are common in fieldwork made them no less difficult to deal with. Having been born and raised in Toronto as part of a financially comfortable, middle-class family, the rural, economically depressed lifestyles of many people I met were foreign to me. Many social conventions and values are different from those I am most familiar with. I was very aware of the fact that I was a Torontonians since, although Torontonians are tolerated, they are not generally favourites with Cape Bretoners. Many of the people I met had never gone to university at all, let alone attended graduate school. I was conscious of the fact that I could be seen as an elitist city-girl and therefore I tried very hard to reserve judgment and I downplayed (though never lied) about my educational status.

Not surprisingly, I made mistakes, despite my intentions to conduct perfect interviews from the start. Even after all the preparation I had done in Toronto, it took me some time to find a comfortable interview pattern. I asked the wrong questions at the beginning, questions which were not relevant to my consultants and therefore did not lead to particularly substantial or consequential answers. I asked leading questions, or I asked

“yes and no” questions. With only three months, I did not have the time to develop as many relationships as I would have liked, nor have I had the chance to return to Cape Breton the following summer, as I was writing this thesis. However, no one refused me an interview outright (although a few used what turned out to be a common Cape Breton excuse: “Call me in two weeks” and two weeks later, “Call me in two weeks”).

Despite these growing pains, I learned a lot from my twenty-two interviews. Chapters 4 and 5 summarize those interviews I found most significant with respect to my own understanding of *puirt-a-beul*. Before presenting these portraits, however, a general overview of Cape Breton history is in order.

3.2 Historical Overview of Cape Breton

There are three large ethnic communities represented in Cape Breton: the Mi’kmaq, Acadians, and Gaels. The Mi’kmaq inhabited the island prior to European colonization and now live primarily on designated reserves, such as Eskasoni. Cape Breton was first settled by Acadians from 1713 to 1758, when the island was a French colony known as *Ile Royale*. It became a British colony in 1785 and was annexed to Nova Scotia in 1820. It was not annexed earlier because of geographical separation from mainland Nova Scotia, as well as religious and linguistic differences (Donovan 1990:20). The population of Cape Breton at the turn of the nineteenth century was about 2500, mostly “French-speaking Acadians, Loyalist refugees from the American Revolution,

Irish from Newfoundland, and Scots from mainland Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island” (Donovan 1990:20). Scottish immigration peaked in the early 1800s:

During the first half of the nineteenth century approximately one million people emigrated from the British Isles to British North America. In August 1802 the first immigrant vessel to sail directly to Cape Breton arrived in Sydney and 400 people settled throughout the island. The exodus from Scotland had begun in earnest. Between 1815 and 1821 approximately 19,000 passengers left Scotland for British North America. It was the immigration of this period that determined the largely Scottish character of Cape Breton. After the Scottish settlement of Cape Breton had been made, ties of family and friendship ensured a steady flow of compatriots from Scotland. By 1843 the Scottish emigration to Cape Breton had come to a halt (Donovan 1990:20).

Scottish emigration to Cape Breton was due in large part to the infamous Clearances of Scotland. During the 18th century, when many Highland chiefs were actually absentee landowners living in Edinburgh and London, Highland rents increased to the point that many tenants chose to emigrate rather than face poverty and possible starvation. Some peasants were captured and sold as slaves (MacLeod 1996:186). However, the chiefs needed their tenants to remain to farm kelp and cattle, both lucrative industries. Parliament increased the fares to North America in order to prevent the massed voluntary emigrations then taking place (MacLeod 1996:187). In the end, the kelp market crashed and the chiefs turned to sheep farming. Sheep require considerable land for grazing and thus the chiefs’ tenants were evicted in order to make space for the animals (MacLeod 1996:194). Tenants emigrated to many places, including Australia and the United States but many of them chose Cape Breton or were directed there by clan chiefs or religious leaders. Thus, emigration occurred in two waves: the first consisted of

voluntary emigrants while the second consisted of emigrants who were forced off their land and often had no choice but to emigrate.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the emigration trend reversed and people began leaving Cape Breton to find work in Western and Central Canada, and in the “Boston States,” referring to New England (Donovan 1990:21). The surplus of women left behind also emigrated in search of husbands. This “emigration of young people contributed to the decline of Cape Breton’s Scottish culture” (Donovan 1990:22). As Gaelic Cape Bretoners settled off the island, they found work with English-speaking employers and married English-speaking spouses, raising English-speaking children. The transmission of the Gaelic culture slowed. Many of these people never returned to Cape Breton on a permanent basis. Rod C. MacNeil, for example, moved to Ontario to find work after World War II. He married Helen, an English-speaker. Even when they moved back to Cape Breton to take over the MacNeil family farm, Rod and Helen continued to speak English to each other (out of necessity) and to their children. In 1931, 24,303 Cape Bretoners spoke Gaelic; today, fewer than 1,000 speakers remain (Donovan 1990:22).

As one would expect of a maritime province, fishing has always been a substantial part of the economy. Unfortunately, severe restrictions recently placed on fishing in Canada’s waters (as a result of commercial over-fishing) has crippled the fishing industry throughout the Canadian Maritimes. Coal mining halted the outward emigration for a time since Cape Breton is the home of sizeable coal beds. However, it caused massive internal migration; many rural Cape Bretoners moved to coal towns such as Inverness and

Sydney in order to work. Gaels working alongside non-Gaels had fewer opportunities to use their language and English became the language of choice. Eventually other sources of power, such as oil, natural gas, and hydro-electricity reduced the demand for coal. Cape Breton's current population is about 177,000 and "jobless figures have remained high for Cape Breton throughout much of the twentieth century" (Donovan 1990:19).

3.3 Gaelic Cultural Events and Organizations

(a) Gaelic Choirs

On Wednesday evenings, Helen and Rod drove a little over an hour to the Gaelic College to attend Catriona Parsons's Gaelic choir. Rod's brother and sister-in-law attended from an even farther distance. I attended the first few weeks, then started twice weekly Gaelic lessons, which unfortunately conflicted with the choir. The choir consisted of approximately fifteen people, some fluent Gaelic speakers, but many simply learners. The music might be written in standard notation, Curwen notation, or not notated at all. The Gaelic lyrics were always provided and were either translated in print, or Catriona would translate them into English orally. Some songs were sung in unison, and a few were sung in two, three, or four parts. Some pieces were ones with which the choir members were previously familiar, and others were new. Catriona went over each vocal part with the singers in order to familiarize them with its melody. She went over the words phonetically, and also explained their meaning.

The choir repertoire included a mix of genres and songs composed in both Scotland and Cape Breton. While I was there, we rehearsed songs such as “*Suas leis a’Ghaidhlig*” (“On with Gaelic,” a rousing, patriotic song composed in Scotland at the turn of the century), “*An Gaol a thug mi og*” (“The Love I Gave When I Was Young,” which Catriona said was the closest a choir song came to *Òran Mòr*: cf. *Òran Mòr* below), and a number of *puirt-a-beul* such as “*A’Bhean a bh’aig an taillear chaol*” (“The Wife of the Skinny Tailor,” a *strathspey*) and “*Ruidhliadh na Coilich Dhubha*” (“Barnyard Reel”).

I also had the opportunity to attend a Gaelic choir rehearsal at the convent in Mabou. This operated in a similar manner, except that there was no musical notation whatsoever. Only the lyrics were notated. There are a number of other local Gaelic choirs, such as one in Sydney.

(b) Concerts

Several communities stage large, annual concerts modelled on that of Broad Cove, the oldest annual community concert, having now run for over forty years. It makes use of the variety show format: different local dancers, singers, and musicians each have an opportunity to perform for a short time of about ten minutes. In 1998, there were mostly fiddlers and step dancers, with the occasional song (mostly in English, rather than Gaelic) and a pipe band. The Broadcove concert is well known and attracts thousands of people, both Cape Bretoners and tourists. It is held in the community churchyard and is

the church's major fundraising event. There are food and gift booths along the perimeter of the concert venue, as well as a beer tent. People either lie on blankets on the grass or sit on the chairs provided. In 1998, the entertainment went on from about noon until ten at night. Audience members came and went. Other concerts in a similar vein include the Highland Village Concert in Iona (the second oldest such concert in Cape Breton) and the Big Pond concert.

Many Cape Breton fiddlers, such as Jackie Dunn, Glenn Graham, Rodney MacDonald, and Howie MacDonald, have produced CDs privately which are mainly available at live performances, such as concerts and other public events. Because they have limited distribution, they tend to circulate primarily among Cape Breton locals, rather than among tourists.

(c) Celtic Colours

The annual Celtic Colours International Festival was inaugurated in October 1997 in an attempt to extend the tourist season into the autumn. The Festival's press release indicates that the first festival injected \$3 million into the Cape Breton economy. The Celtic Colours Festival includes both local and international musicians performing at venues across Cape Breton. In 1997, performers included Sharon Shannon and The Chieftains (Ireland), Capercaillie (Scotland), Ashley MacIsaac, Natalie MacMaster, and The Barra MacNeils (Cape Breton). Individual communities are also encouraged to host

activities such as concerts and cultural workshops. The 1998 promotional brochure indicates that 32 shows were planned in 26 different communities:

The Gaelic culture of Cape Breton has its strongest roots in our rural communities, many of which have retained strong ties with the language, the music and the traditions, and many of which have held onto their own special way of doing things. For this reason many of the performances and events of the Festival will be happening where the roots are strongest, in rural communities like Mabou, Christmas Island, Judique and others. Each of the participating communities will host events of their choice, showing the world what they do best. Stepdancing lessons. Gaelic language workshops. Square dances. Ceilidhs. Just to name a few (Celtic Colours Festival website: General Information 1998).

Admission prices ranged from nothing (for some rural workshops and lectures) to upwards of \$30 (for headline concerts). One aim is to have the audience actually become actively involved in Celtic culture: “We’re also aiming for more participation ... square dances, milling frolics, workshops” (*Celtic Colours International Festival: Update 1998*).

For such an economically depressed area as Cape Breton, and for the large number of Cape Bretoners dependent on the tourist industry (including owners and employees of hotels, restaurants, gift shops, and tourist attractions), Celtic Colours might seem a boon. But while the festival may appear to have been an unqualified success, some Cape Bretoners were less than impressed. Frances MacEachen, editor of the Gaelic-English quarterly newspaper, *Am Bràighe*, wrote,

Even at the promotional level it is difficult to distinguish what exactly they are promoting. Cape Breton Gaelic culture is not exactly front and center. Even by industry standards, categorizing some of these performers as Celtic would be a long shot (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton], Fall 1997).

MacEachen's editorial in the same issue made it clear that she felt that Cape Breton Gaelic culture was being exploited for the sake of tourist dollars:

If we are going to salvage from neglect's ravages any semblance of a Gaelic culture here in Cape Breton what we need is education, not promotion. We don't need any more awareness, camera crews or fiddles on brochures; we need genuine, honest-to-goodness resource and skills development. *Fèis an Eilein* can't hold any more people in its firehall, and they can count on at least one camera crew at each *Fèis*. Mabou Thanksgiving Concert is always packed, no thanks to Celtic Colours. What these communities need is investment in the language and culture that naturally draw people to these areas (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton], Fall 1997).

(d) Fèisean (Festivals)

Christmas Island, across the water from Iona, inaugurated its annual festival, *Fèis an Eilean* (Island Festival) in 1991. Modeled after Scotland's first *fèis*, *Fèis Bharraidh* (The Barra Festival) in 1981, it is "a non-competitive event that provides its participants with a personal learning experience in regional Gaelic culture through music, song, dance, lore and tradition" (Comunn Fèis an Eilein 1998:4). In 1998, the week-long event included workshops, concerts, a milling frolic, a traditional codfish supper, a Gaelic mass in the community church, and a bonfire on the beach, as well as activities aimed specifically at children and teenagers. In 1998, the festival itself was preceded by weekly concerts, each covering a different aspect of Cape Breton Gaelic culture (namely piping, fiddling, step dancing, singing, etc.), followed by a square dance featuring the concert's headlining musicians. Additionally, Comunn Fèis an Eilein received enough funding from the Nova Scotia Arts Council to run Gaelic language classes, step dancing classes, and instrument lessons, for the six weeks preceding the festival.

The *fèis* is about more than attracting tourists:

While the *Fèis* attracts people to their community, *Comunn Fèis an Eilein* president Allison MacKenzie says the activities of the *Fèis* committee are first and foremost for those that live there. It's about building pride in who they are as Gaels from Christmas Island (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton] Summer 1998:6).

Comunn Fèis an Eilein organizes Gaelic cultural activities throughout the year, including a day-long winter *fèis* (*MacTalla* 1998:11). The goal of these activities is to support Cape Breton Gaelic culture so that it can remain self-sustaining:

The *fèis* committee's approach to developing the festival recognizes the *fèis* as a social and economic development tool that promotes community cohesiveness and initiative through a strengthened identity with indigenous Gaelic language and culture. Critical to the process are the ideas, organization and planning generated by local people who design and direct their own event (*MacTalla* 1998:11).

Since *Fèis an Eilein* began, three other Cape Breton communities have started *fèisean* of their own: *Fèis Mabu* (Mabou), *Fèis Cladach a Tuath* (North Shore), and *Fèis nan Òran* (Iona).

(e) St. Ann's Gaelic College

The Gaelic College, established in 1938, is a school "devoted to the study and preservation of the Gaelic language and Celtic arts and culture" (Gaelic College Homepage 1999). During the summer, week-long study sessions are mounted for either youths or adults. During most sessions, a student may take step dancing, Highland dancing, Gaelic, bagpipes, fiddle, harp, and related subjects. For one week at the end of the summer, a Gaelic immersion week is offered, during which students are expected to

speak Gaelic at all times and students take Gaelic lessons of various sorts (language, idioms, songs, writing, etc.).

In addition to formal classes, visitors may come to the campus to “tour our museum of Scottish history and culture in the Great Hall of the Clans, see local weavers and spinners at work in the studio, or discuss genealogy with members of the St. Ann’s-Baddeck/Waipu Twinning Society” (Gaelic College website 1999). There is a craft and gift shop that sells tartans, books, jewelry, clothing, and other gift items. There is also a small resource centre which houses Gaelic books and audio recordings.

(f) Mòds

In 1891, *An Comunn Gàidhealach* (The Gaelic Society) was established in Scotland and the very next year, the first annual Royal National Mòd was held in Oban (The 1999 Royal National Mòd website). The Mòd is “the National Festival of Gaelic Music and Culture One of its key objectives is to promote the Gaelic language” (The 1995 Royal National Mòd website). It achieves this objective in part by providing

a successful competitor with an indication of achievement which can then be used as an opportunity for entering the professional arena. Thus the Mòd performs an important function for those with talent to aspire to the highest levels of their ability. The Mòd also exists to encourage the extension of traditional Gaelic cultural elements into contemporary modes of expression such as popular music. In addition, the Mòd encourages the exchange of artistic expression between Scotland and other Celtic countries. ... While the competitive side of the Mòd will be retained, having stood the test of time, An Comunn will seek to introduce more non-competitive events as further mechanisms for developing the language (ibid.).

Each year the Mòd is held in a different Gaelic-speaking area of Scotland, and includes competitions for children and adults; women and men; and fluent Gaelic speakers and learners. Categories include various genres of solo Gaelic song; urban and rural choirs; Gaelic drama and recitations; and instrumental music (harp, accordion, fiddle, piano, and bagpipe). Originally a one-day festival, Mòds are now held over the course of a week.

With regional and provincial competitions as well as the National Mòd, there were many opportunities for Gaelic-speaking children to participate and they were, as my Scottish consultants implied, in fact expected to (MacRitchie, Parsons, Primrose).¹ Children have been taught the prescribed songs in school, both as soloists and as members of choirs (Primrose). Thus the Mòd's profile was increased through the education system and substantial participation was assured by the expectation that children perform.

There are separate competitions for Gaelic learners and fluent speakers. Because the Mòd aims to promote the Gaelic language, each competitor is interviewed in Gaelic before performing in order to determine his/her fluency (An Comunn Gaidhealach: *Syllabus, Prize List and Rules of The National Mòd* n.d.:4-7). Learners must demonstrate a grasp of basic language skills while fluent competitors must exhibit thorough competence in Gaelic. Gaelic expertise is particularly an issue in the "fluent" categories:

¹ I cannot corroborate this information since my research has taken place outside of Scotland, nor can I assert that Gaelic-speaking children are still expected to compete in the Mòd; my consultants spoke based on their personal, childhood experiences and did not indicate whether the situation continues to hold true in the present.

since the point of the Mòd is to promote language and culture, it is therefore inappropriate for someone to win the top medals without Gaelic proficiency.

Two Gold Medals, which are highly respected, are awarded to the best fluent Gaelic speaking female and male singers. However, there was some concern that a “classical” form of singing was being espoused at the expense of “traditional” singing and therefore a Traditional Medal was added in 1971 (Royal National Mòd 1997:158). Some believe that the Traditional Medal is more valuable than the Gold Medal (cf. Chapter 4.1).

At the national level, the solo puirt-a-beul category is open only to fluent Gaelic speakers (An Comunn Gaidhealach n.d.:31). The implication is that Gaelic learners do not have the ability to perform puirt-a-beul properly or adequately. This elevates and legitimizes puirt-a-beul as something only a select few can perform properly. In addition, while most choir categories do not specify the song type(s) to be performed, there is a specific unison puirt-a-beul category for choirs (An Comunn Gaidhealach n.d.:37, 39), suggesting that puirt-a-beul is worth singling out as a test of a choir’s abilities and again legitimizing puirt-a-beul.

The popularity of the Royal National Mòd in Scotland inspired An Comunn Gaidhealach America to establish its own annual Mòd. Although there are fewer categories and they are geared to the learner rather than the fluent speaker, there are still categories covering choirs, solo singers, and recitations, as well as categories for children and adults. At present, the American Mòd attracts competitors from across the country

via its “mail-in” competition, for which competitors mail their tape-recorded entry. It is significant to Cape Breton because a number of Cape Breton Gaels have acted as its adjudicators (Parsons).

During the late 1970s, Ontario started its own Mòd although it is now defunct. In the past, however, Mòd Ontario attracted competitors from across the U.S. and Canada. The decision to cease competition was made in 1994. Ken MacSporran, the president of Mòd Ontario at the time, said, “Instead of competitions, we will be having more in-depth workshops which focus on different aspects of Gaelic language, music and culture. The emphasis will be on getting more people to become involved actively in the culture” (*Clansman* [Halifax], April/May 1994:8). At present, Mòd Ontario simply organizes two to four Gaelic Language and Song days per year in Toronto.

Generally, Mòd Ontario was held in Toronto, although in 1993 it was held in Glengarry, Ontario, where a strong Gaelic community resided until recently (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton] Autumn 1993:11), and the weekend-long event included concerts and workshops, as well as the actual competitions. Although I have found no formal documentation indicating when the competitive Mòd finally ended, it would appear that 1994 was its final year.

Mòd Ontario attracted adjudicators, workshop leaders, special guests and competitors from Cape Breton. Some of my consultants, such as Mary Jane Lamond, Jeff MacDonald, Jamie MacNeil, and Roddie C. MacNeil attended or even competed at several Ontario Mòds. However, it seems that they were strongly urged to attend because

there was a lack of competitors (*Am Braighe* [Cape Breton] Summer 1994:27; FW interview), not because they particularly wished to compete.

The Cape Breton Gaelic College also hosts the annual Nova Scotia Gaelic Mòd. It is planned over three days and includes concerts, as well as competitions in Gaelic song, language, piping and highland dance. Workshops are also part of the event, along with a Gaelic-English ecumenical church service. Recently, I have not seen ads for the Mòd, although I know that it was held in August 1998, organized by Catriona Parsons, a Scottish immigrant and Gaelic teacher at the College. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend although Rod and Helen MacNeil were present with their daughter and two granddaughters and described it to me afterwards.

The Nova Scotia Gaelic Mòd appears to be largely ignored by Cape Bretoners. Many of my consultants felt negatively about Mòds and competition (Maxie MacNeil, Jamie MacNeil, FW). As Frances MacEachen wrote in an editorial:

Formal competition is foreign to Gaelic culture. Ask any of the Gaelic singers featured in this issue They will also probably tell you that inherent in the tradition itself were extremely high standards, unspoken but understood and shared by the whole community. It is these standards that have allowed our music, stories and songs to survive for centuries, not those set down by piping or Gaelic societies of London and Edinburgh. Music, song and story were social and interactive in Gaelic communities. Freedom and individuality were essential and innovation was welcome. However, change came in accordance with internal standards maintained by the community (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton] Summer 1994:4).

As a result of this widespread attitude, Hector MacNeil, another Gaelic instructor at the College, eliminated the competitive element from the Nova Scotia Gaelic Mòd in 1999 (Toronto Gaelic Society presentation, October 2, 1999). Instead, the Mòd highlighted

workshops and recitals. While participation in the Mòd did not increase, it did not decrease either.

(g) Media Broadcasts

The media play a small role in Cape Breton Gaelic musical culture. Only about four or five television channels—none local—can be received by most Cape Breton households. Most regions are not serviced by cable, although there are increasing numbers of people who have satellite dishes. I am not aware of any television stations that air Gaelic programs.

The radio is somewhat better, although Gaelic song receives little airplay. There are two well-known radio programs. The CBC show, “Island Echoes,” was originally hosted by a Gaelic speaker although it is now hosted in English. It features instrumental and vocal music from Scotland and Cape Breton for an hour on Saturday evenings. A local radio station, CJFX in Antigonish, also has a weekday radio program, “The Ceilidh,” from 6-7 pm, hosted by Ray “Mac” MacDonald, which tends to play traditional Cape Breton music recorded by Cape Breton musicians. On Saturdays at the same time, the show “The Celtic Fringe” is aired.

There are other, less widely accessible radio shows, such as “Celtic Crossroads” hosted in Gaelic by Rosemary McCormack of B&R Heritage Enterprises. This Sunday evening show airs Celtic music from Ireland, Scotland, and Cape Breton out of CIGO in Port Hawkesbury. Gaelic learners Geoff May and Rebecca-Lynne MacDonald-May host

“Aiseiridh nan Gàidheal” (“The Gaelic Resurrection”) on Saturdays from 6-7pm, on CJKM, the Chéticamp radio station. Only Gaelic language songs and stories are played, while Geoff and Rebecca-Lynne host the show in both English and Gaelic. Both shows reach only a restricted geographical area within Cape Breton Island.

(h) Cultural Groups

B&R Heritage Enterprises, established in 1992, is a company in Iona that “is devoted to documenting the Gaelic culture of Cape Breton Island through recordings of Gaelic song, through workshops on Gaelic singing and through school/community programming” (*Celtic Heritage* [Halifax] February/March 1999:10). It is owned and operated by Brian and Rosemary McCormack. Rosemary is a native Gaelic speaker from South Uist, Scotland. She researches Gaelic song in central Cape Breton. The company has released a number of CDs, including Mary Jane Lamond’s first, *Bho Thìr nan Craobh*. Some of their CDs are compilations (*Tìr Mo Ghràidh/The Land I Love* and *Or Cheap Breatuinn/Cape Breton’s Gaelic Gold*); others feature a particular singer (for instance, Mary Jane Lamond and Margo Carruthers); and still others feature a particular musical genre (e.g. milling songs sung by The North Shore Gaelic Singers). In addition, the company stocks and sells Gaelic recordings and printed materials from Scotland, and runs various Gaelic song workshops through the summer. Rosemary is also the director of *Fèis nan Òran* (Song Festival), which is held every May. During the *Fèis*, native

Gaelic singers teach Cape Breton songs to learners. *Fèis nan Òran* also publishes *Togaibh Fonn* (Sing a Song), a quarterly newsletter.

A bilingual newspaper, *Am Bràighe*, is published quarterly from Brook Village, Cape Breton and edited by Frances MacEachen, a Gaelic learner. The paper focuses on Gaelic culture in Cape Breton and publishes articles on fiddle tunes, tradition bearers, and cultural events. In each issue there is also a Gaelic lesson, a number of stories, CD and book reviews, and articles. Many are translated into English.

Frances MacEachen is also involved with Gaeltalk Communications, a fledgling company that is devoted to Gaelic education. This organization currently offers several song and story workshops through the year, and Jim Watson, a Gaelic scholar and partner in the business, offers private Gaelic lessons, whether in person, on the telephone, or via email. He also offers translation services. Gaeltalk Communications's policy is that any aspect of Gaelic culture, such as language or music, must be learned in the entire cultural context.

(i) Cèilidhs

Throughout the summer, tourists are invited to attend *cèilidhs*. "Cèilidh" in Gaelic literally means "visit" but "its meaning ... has changed with its English use to mean 'party' or scheduled get-together with prearranged music and charge at the door" ("How you 'make' a Cèilidh in Cape Breton" 1996). In Irish and Scottish circles, a "cèilidh" often refers to a dance. Traditionally, however, a *cèilidh* was a visit amongst

neighbours. These visits were informal and could happen at any time, any day of the week, at anyone's house. Sometimes, people simply conversed. Other times—particularly if there were several people gathered together—the cèilidh would include stories, songs, music, and dancing. However, these aspects did not define a cèilidh.

Hector MacNeil, Gaelic instructor at the University College Cape Breton and the Gaelic College in St. Ann's, describes a traditional cèilidh as follows:

A Ceilidh-house was a favored gathering place in a community and each ceilidh-house would be known locally for its particular form of entertainment. This would most often be determined by the talents of the occupants of the house. A man or woman known for their singing abilities would attract other singers and those who enjoyed songs to that particular house. Hence, singing would be the main entertainment with story-telling, music and dance mixed in. Another house might be known primarily for story-telling, and yet another for music and dance.

Whatever the favored entertainment, visitors would start arriving after the evening chores were finished. Each new arrival would be greeted in turn and invited to tell their news. The early hours were thus spent mainly in the discussion of the small and large events of the day. As the evening settled, the music, song and story-telling would commence and would continue through the evening and into the night.

Often performance was followed by discussion. The history behind a story or a song, the meaning and nuances of a particular word or line, bowing styles, fingering techniques—these and other topics might be discussed and even debated. In this way, people shared their collective knowledge, for a Gaelic audience at its best is an informed audience capable of truly appreciating the individual style and talents of the performer within the parameters of the wider tradition. Even the person who might never “perform” participates in a valuable and valued way through his or her knowledge of the tradition (Hector MacNeil, Celtic Colours Festival website: Our Living Celtic Culture, 1998).

Although Gaelic speakers still mean “a visit” when they use the word “cèilidh” in Gaelic conversation, most people use it to refer to a public event. During the summer, the newspaper advertises dozens of cèilidhs and there are often signs along the roadside inviting passersby to join in. I attended a milling frolic in Louisbourg that was advertised

as a cèilidh. Alice Freeman, who owns and operates a gift shop in Inverness, *The Bear Paw*, organizes weekly cèilidhs in the local fire hall on behalf of that community's business sector. At her cèilidhs, a number of musicians, singers, and dancers are hired to perform. They demonstrate Cape Breton fiddling (accompanied by keyboard and/or guitar), Gaelic song, step dancing, and sometimes square dancing. Audience members are invited to contribute something, whether a song or a story or anything else, but tourists typically preferred to watch at the cèilidhs I attended.

While the above inventory may not be exhaustive, I believe it is representative of the significant Gaelic events and organizations in Cape Breton. Although the list may at first appear considerable, the reality is that these activities struggle to exist financially and most reach only a restricted number of people, either for geographical reasons, or because of the limited tourist season. The fact that the majority of these activities and groups are aimed at Gaelic learners also indicates the threatened status of the Gaelic language.

3.4 Important Aspects of Gaelic Song

Song is an important part of Gaelic culture. It is therefore not surprising that there are a plethora of song types. Aside from puirt-a-beul, there are milking songs, butter churning songs, love songs, laments, lullabies, "great songs," matchmaking songs, rowing songs, eulogies, etc. An understanding of these different types of Gaelic song is very important when considering puirt-a-beul. Consultants' comments about, and

attitudes toward, puirt-a-beul cannot be understood without recognizing that puirt-a-beul fit into a much larger context of Gaelic song in general. Unfortunately, a thorough exploration of these other Gaelic song types is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Appendix D provides a brief overview of many types of Gaelic song. While it is not feasible to discuss every Gaelic song type, milling songs must be described before continuing due to their prevalence in Cape Breton.

(a) Milling songs

Milling songs—or waulking songs, as they are called in Scotland—are indeed of great interest since they are not simply a song, but accompany a type of labour not exercised elsewhere: the shrinking and softening of wool. Margaret Fay Shaw describes a typical Scottish waulking:

The ends of a length of newly woven cloth are sewn together to make it a circle, and the cloth is then placed on a long trestle table and soaked with hot urine. An even number of women sit at the table, say twelve with six a side, and the cloth is passed around sunwise, to the left, with a kneading motion. They reach to the right and clutch the cloth, draw in, pass to the left, push out and free the hands to grasp again to the right. One, two, three, four, slowly the rhythm emerges. A woman will chant “*Far ail ill lo, ho ro hu a*” and the others will join in with, “*Hao ri o 's na ho hi iu a / Far ail ill lo, ho ro hu a*” and the first woman sings alone, “*S trom mo cheum, cha n-eil mi sunndach.*”

The soloist continues to sing the lines which tell the tale, and (in the case of this and some similar songs) the first line of the chorus, the other women singing the other two. The choruses of waulking songs are usually meaningless, consisting of syllables that carry the air; but they have a mnemonic significance, and must always be sung correctly (Shaw 1977 [1955]: 72-3).

Obviously, with machinery able to do the work, the need to waulk or mill wool cloth has disappeared. However, what is incredible to many is that the milling frolic has continued

to exist and be practiced in Cape Breton, but it has altered slightly from the Scottish practise. Since the Scottish practice of waulking has been described extensively in a number of books, including (but not limited to) *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (M.F. Shaw 1953), *Hebridean Folksongs* (Campbell and Collinson 1969-1981), and *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (Collinson 1966:67-76), the particular practice of milling songs in Cape Breton is the focus of the remainder of this section.

First, both men and women may participate in a Cape Breton milling frolic whereas in Scotland, only women were allowed. No one is certain why. Second, Cape Breton milling frolics include song genres beyond the traditional Scottish waulking songs, such as sailing songs, whose rhythm works in the milling context as well (Òran Luaidh: Gaelic Milling Songs 1996). Songs from other genres were introduced to the milling repertoire as long as they had a beat conducive to the milling.

When discussing why the Cape Breton tradition includes men while the Scottish tradition does not, someone suggested to me that Canada's colder weather kept men inside more than in the Hebrides and resulted in their involvement in what had traditionally been women's work. Or, the men may have had to drive their wives long distances in order to attend a milling frolic, and rather than wait outside, they participated as well. More likely, there was an urgent need for new clothing and blankets upon arrival in Canada and everyone—regardless of gender—was recruited for the work. Immigrants would have had to replace clothes left behind in Scotland and, probably unprepared for the cold climate, had to create additional and warmer clothing and blankets. Since the

men were not familiar with the waulking song repertoire, they sang the songs they knew, which might include reaping songs, sailing or rowing songs, or other labour songs.

While the men contributed their repertoire to the milling frolics, some traditional waulking songs were lost. This is because, according to one of my consultants, Rosemary McCormack, a number waulking songs were about women's subjects and women did not feel comfortable singing them in front of men. Apparently, waulking song repertoire covered such subjects as sex, matchmaking, and other ribald topics from a woman's perspective.

When milling frolics were still functional in Cape Breton,

women would prepare the cloth in the fall; that is carding, spinning and weaving, in order to start the milling frolics sometime in early February. It was not uncommon to attend two millings a week at that time. An invitation was also necessary in order to attend. These invitations were decided upon by going so many miles up the road and so many miles down the road. ... Generally, these millings would begin at 7 in the evening and last to 2 or 3 in the morning or even later. The milling was never ended before all of the cloth was milled (Marilyn MacDonald 1988-89:9).²

From the 1930s onward, Cape Bretoners had more money and tended to buy their clothes from catalogues, such as Eatons (Marilyn MacDonald 1988-89:12), thereby making milling frolics unnecessary. Marilyn MacDonald's research revealed that the last functional milling frolic held in the North Shore area of Cape Breton was held in 1941 and that milling frolics were not held there again for about another decade (1988-89:12).

² Marilyn MacDonald's unpublished essay can be found at the Beaton Institute at the University College Cape Breton in Sydney. Presumably, MacDonald is not a Gaelic song scholar. However, I found her essay to be clear and to make logical statements supported by her ethnographic research. It is also one of the few documents I have found recording the social context in which milling frolics operated in Cape Breton and how they changed over time.

At this time, many Cape Bretoners were forced to seek work off the island. Many emigrated to the United States (particularly Boston) and to central and western Canada. However, they frequently returned to Cape Breton over their summer holidays. As a result, “it seems that the revival of the milling frolic centered in large part around the annual summer return of these [people] as dates of the millings would be set around their return. In many cases, these types of milling frolics would be held out in barns or garages, as well as in the homes” (Marilyn MacDonald 1988-89:16). Milling frolics also began to be held by churches for fund-raising purposes (Marilyn MacDonald 1988-89:17). Because these milling frolics were social rather than functional,

the focus on the singers changed somewhat. Although singing originally was vital to milling cloth, the emphasis, I feel, would have been placed on the technique for milling the cloth, rather than the singers. At this time, however, the focus would have been on the singer and his recollection of the songs. Attention need not have been paid to the cloth as it existed solely to provide a beat for the performers and their songs (Marilyn MacDonald 1988-89:17).

The Cape Breton milling frolic continues today as a social event. It offers the opportunity for Gaelic speakers and singers to come together and indulge in Gaelic songs in a participatory manner.

At one time, Gaelic conversation was also heard at milling frolics but now the language heard is generally English. A token woollen cloth is used—it is used at different milling frolics until it wears out. There is no need to use urine to soften the wool but the wool, when beaten, releases a lot of dust and fibres, so the wool is still wet with water. Furthermore, the cloth is no longer passed from person to person; instead, each person beats a portion of the cloth in front of them. Sometimes the blanket is passed

around between songs. Various venues have had traditional milling tables made for them, but if necessary, any large, sturdy table will do.

I went to several milling frolics while in Cape Breton. They were always staged for tourists with a small number of native Gaelic speakers hired to make up the frolic. Gaelic learners, such as myself, were free to participate and often helped to fill out the numbers at the table. The tourists themselves only played a small part in the actual event. I was always surprised that no one at the table ever bothered to explain the milling frolic to the audience. That was left to the organizers of the event, if they wished to do so. The singers never explained the songs they sang, translated them into English, or provided the generally easy choruses to the audience. Audience members were sometimes invited to come to the table, but they just beat the cloth and made noise during the choruses, since they did not know what they were singing. No explanation of the history of the milling frolic, its traditions, or its component parts was ever offered by the singers.

The only exception to the lack of tourist involvement is the weekly milling frolic held at the Schooner Village Restaurant in Margaree Valley (Tuesday nights, 8 pm). This particular milling frolic is geared to tourist education and therefore the choruses were provided on a flip chart, and the songs were explained. Geoff May, a Gaelic learner, hosts the event, which is advertised as an evening of Gaelic song, while James Watson, a fluent Gaelic speaker, leads the songs, runs through pronunciations, and provides background information. Technically the evening is not a milling frolic, although milling songs dominate, and the participants sing around a table with a milling blanket, as at a

normal milling frolic. Non-milling songs are also sung, in order to demonstrate the breadth of Gaelic song. Another difference is that the singers at this event are all Gaelic learners whereas most milling frolics include native Gaelic speakers.

There were various responses to the milling frolics by tourists. At one new milling frolic in Louisbourg, there was an intermission and many tourists did not return afterwards. They presumably had seen enough and had grown bored or frustrated. The annual milling frolic in Mabou is a part of an annual "ceilidh" event. Several musical events happen simultaneously in different venues, and there are booths set up to sell crafts, food and other items. The 1998 Mabou milling frolic went on throughout the afternoon. Singers came and went, as did the tourists. Sometimes the singers sat at the table, and sometimes they stepped away to chat amongst themselves and their friends. The Mabou milling frolic is well-known amongst Gaelic-speakers and they come because they know they will be able to see people they have not seen for some time and because they can converse in Gaelic. An event co-ordinator holds a microphone up to each soloist in turn so that the audience can hear the verses and the co-ordinator provides a brief introduction to the milling frolic at its start. Tourists did not have to be "polite" and sit longer than they wished. There was also more opportunity for them to speak to Gaels when they were not singing.

The Christmas Island *Feis* milling frolic was different yet again. The *Feis* is not meant so much as a tourist event as an educational and cultural program for native Cape Bretoners. Therefore, most of the milling frolic audience there were already familiar with

milling frolics and were happier to sit throughout. They talked amongst themselves, or listened. There were too many people interested in singing to fit at the table, so people took turns. Some tourists arrived, but they were in the minority. Again, as with the Mabou milling frolic, the event remains popular amongst native Gaels.

Because the milling frolic is so unusual, it is popular amongst both tourists and scholars. The participatory, non-hierarchical nature of the milling frolic offers a contrast to more familiar concert settings, featuring a soloist on stage divided from the audience. Many of my consultants commented that the milling frolics are far more popular than they ever used to be. Their centrality in the culture has left little room for song genres not appropriate to the milling frolic, including *puirt-a-beul* (on the “light” side) and the *Òran Mòr* (on the “heavy” side).

(b) Vocables in Gaelic Song

It is worth discussing the use of vocables in Gaelic song since many consultants associate them with *puirt-a-beul*. *Puirt-a-beul* are not the only song type to include vocables. Some song types consist entirely of vocables, such as *canntaireachd* (cf. Chapter 2.1 page 21 and Appendix D.9). However, most songs include a mixture of vocables and actual words. Collinson states that “refrains may be entirely composed of meaningless vocables, as in the labour songs” such as waulking/milling songs, lullabies, and rowing songs (1966:91) while their verses may not. Sometimes “we find a single ‘horò’ or other vocable syllable by way of interjection at the beginning or end of an

otherwise meaningful line” (Collinson 1966:92). Each song type appears to have its own distinct set of vocables, although further research is needed for confirmation.

When I first began to study puirt-a-beul, I was under the impression that they were primarily made of vocables. After having listened to and read more than one hundred, my impression is that vocables are in fact used sparingly in puirt-a-beul. The assumption that puirt-a-beul consist mainly of vocables could be explained by a number of factors. First, the speed at which puirt-a-beul are sung may make it difficult to differentiate between vocables and words when hearing one for the first time, particularly for non-fluent Gaelic speakers (cf. Chapter 6.2). Second, unfamiliar references to people, places, and/or events may be interpreted as vocables. Third, the mixture of vocables and words may have served to limit the number of people that could understand the bawdy or satirical texts (cf. Chapter 6.4.b).

This chapter has delineated a brief history of Scottish immigration to Cape Breton, various Gaelic venues, and milling frolics. These elements constitute the context in which puirt-a-beul are understood by my consultants since many are the direct descendants of Scottish immigrants; most have participated in a milling frolic; and interested in Gaelic culture, they have read Gaelic newspapers, attended the Gaelic College, and participated in *fèisean*. My consultants’ comments about puirt-a-beul cannot be appreciated without having first understood where they hear them, how often, and to what other song types they are compared.

The literature review in Chapter 2 indicated how puirt-a-beul have been portrayed in the past. It is now time to consider how puirt-a-beul are portrayed in the present by the people who hear them, sing them, teach them; like them and hate them.

CHAPTER FOUR TORONTO INTERVIEWS

In preparation for my Cape Breton fieldwork, six interviews were conducted in Toronto. I hoped to discover important issues worth pursuing in Cape Breton and I wanted to practice my interviewing skills. Three of these interviews are described in detail below. Not surprisingly, it took me some time to identify good potential consultants. My first two consultants, unfortunately, only had a cursory understanding of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Their interviews are summarized in Appendix B.

However, my third interview changed everything. I interviewed a woman who has considerable familiarity with Cape Breton Gaelic song, language, and culture in general but she preferred that her name and comments not be used in my thesis. At the same time, my thesis would be considerably flawed without describing the impressions the interview left on me since the interview completely changed my understanding of *puirt-a-beul*, affected my fieldwork preparation, and altered my thesis methodology.

My third consultant, FW, accorded *puirt-a-beul* very low value, explaining that they could never compare to the really “good” Gaelic songs, which have more poetic lyrics, and she argued that most native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers and singers hold similar views. She assumed that most singers would be familiar with *puirt-a-beul*, but she also argued that they would never be sung at a house party or milling frolic because they are not valued highly enough. She explained that, in Cape Breton, *puirt-a-beul* are considered tunes rather than songs. However, she did add that she had heard a Scottish singer sing them at a Cape Breton house party which she attributed to the fact that the

Scots' Gaelic song repertoire is not as rich as that which has been preserved in Cape Breton. If puirt-a-beul have any importance, she argued, it would be for the fiddlers, who use them to determine the rhythm of the tune in question since the rhythm of the puirt-a-beul lyrics dictates the rhythm of the tune.

FW suggested that puirt-a-beul are most appealing to non-Gaelic speakers, who are impressed with their speed, flashy lyrics, and the need for phenomenal breath control. FW differentiated between puirt-a-beul, which she considers "tunes," and "songs." Serious Gaelic learners and native speakers, she argued, are more interested in the variety of *songs* available in Cape Breton. FW did, however, relate one incident when she heard a Gaelic-speaking woman sing a bawdy port-a-beul in a store upon seeing something that reminded her of it.

FW explained that one Cape Breton fiddler she knew had the puirt-a-beul words often for only one turn of a tune (the "A" section), which might suggest that the tunes came first and that words were added later as a mnemonic aid. On the other hand, she pointed out that some people "diddle" tunes instead; she was uncertain why some tunes would be diddled while others have lyrics. FW also noted that some lyrics seem more modern than the tunes, again suggesting that the tunes were composed well before the lyrics, rather than the other way around.

She talked about the importance of the connection between language and music in Gaelic culture and quoted a well-respected, if deceased (1996), Cape Breton tradition bearer, Joe Neil MacNeil: "Music is language and language is music." Because of this

important connection, she was uneasy with Mòds, since competitors could be language beginners, sing their songs phonetically, and yet still win a competition. FW explained that the competitive nature of the Mòd is foreign to Cape Breton Gaelic culture, which celebrates its song culture communally, particularly at milling frolics.

My consultant's attitude towards puirt-a-beul surprised me since Joe Neil MacNeil, the very man she had quoted, had also recorded more than *one hundred* examples of puirt-a-beul for the Nova Scotia Gaelic folklore project (Shaw 1991?). If this tradition-bearer found puirt-a-beul fit to learn, remember and record, I felt they must have some cultural value. Further, where one person recorded so many puirt-a-beul, it seemed likely that others would know some, although perhaps not as many as a hundred.

FW's rejection of puirt-a-beul caused me to question my choice of thesis topic. According to FW, puirt-a-beul are not accorded much value in Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Clifford warns that

transcription, which as a kind of copying appears to involve the least transformation, is in no way a direct or innocent record. The process may have the political effect of making canonical what is simply one telling of a myth or item of cultural lore (1990:58).

What if, in the process of writing about puirt-a-beul, I cause cultural outsiders to consider puirt-a-beul more valuable than it is within the culture? Because, by necessity, this thesis focuses on puirt-a-beul while virtually excluding discussion of other aspects of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, puirt-a-beul may, to a cultural outsider, appear to be more important or prevalent than it really is. To address this concern, every effort has been made to acknowledge Cape Bretoners' attitudes towards puirt-a-beul, whether negative or

positive, so that the reader will not be misled. Furthermore, over the course of my fieldwork, it became apparent to me that puirt-a-beul do play an important—if not always respected—role in Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

The issues raised by FW affected my work in other ways as well. FW's comments became the basis on which my subsequent interview questions were formulated since I wanted to know if my consultant's opinions were, in fact, common amongst Cape Breton Gaels. Throughout the remainder of my research, I found myself regularly returning to FW's comments, comparing new information with that which she had given me. Many of the issues FW flagged became central issues in later interviews and, ultimately, in this thesis. If FW had never been interviewed or had been interviewed at a later date, the focus of this thesis might have been very different.

My fourth interview was with Rhoda MacRitchie, an immigrant from the Gaelic-speaking Isle of Harris in the Scottish Hebrides who now lives in Toronto. Rhoda expressed a great love of puirt-a-beul and stated that most Scots would feel similarly. Rhoda's opinions were often in direct contrast to those held by FW. Even though Cape Breton Gaelic culture is frequently depicted as a preserved historical version of Scottish Gaelic culture, some fundamental differences between the two became apparent. Contradictory opinions, such as those of FW and Rhoda, brought me to the realization that Cape Breton Gaelic culture has become a unique entity, despite the two cultures' similar roots.

My fifth interview was with David Livingston-Lowe, my Gaelic teacher of two years who has been to Cape Breton and Scotland on numerous occasions and who has a great love of Gaelic culture. As a linguist and a scholar, David was able to highlight some of the major issues in Cape Breton Gaelic song. The information he provided gave me a general understanding of the Gaelic song context. It is important to remember that I had not yet been to Cape Breton and I had had minimal experience with Gaelic song in Scotland. I depended upon my consultants for information about Cape Breton Gaelic culture. I did not yet have my own observations that would have enabled me to situate my consultants' comments.

My sixth and final Toronto consultant was Stephanie Conn, who sings with Puirt-a-Baroque. As a Gaelic learner, professional singer, and someone who had earned her Masters degree in Musicology at the University of Toronto, she was able to discuss a number of issues in great depth: insider/outsider status, native speaker versus learner, singer versus fiddler, etc.

After these six interviews, I had spoken to one native Gaelic speaker and four Gaelic learners of varying levels of fluency; I had spoken to a professional singer, two Gaelic language teachers, a Gaelic song teacher, a Gaelic song competitor, and a Celtic dancer; I had interviewed someone from Scotland, and three people with varying degrees of knowledge of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. In truth, I had not consciously attempted to interview consultants with such varying backgrounds. There was simply not much choice in Toronto. My only criterion when choosing consultants was that they were familiar

with puirt-a-beul. But what I realized was that I had an interesting cross-section of perspectives. Sometimes my consultants agreed with each other and sometimes they differed in opinion but, as a result, I felt that I was beginning to understand the breadth of puirt-a-beul in Gaelic culture. It was a lesson which affected my Cape Breton interviews; consultants with different relationships to puirt-a-beul were selected and, as a result, I feel that my discussion of puirt-a-beul is fairly representative of the culture, and reveals some of the myriad definitions and uses of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

Clifford laments that “we seldom encounter in published work any cacophony or discursive contradiction of the sort found in actual cultural life” (1990:59). While I do not suggest that my work is free from the subjective editing which serves to smooth out the bumps and rough spots of my field work, an attempt to address this issue has been made by acknowledging the many contradictions expressed in my interviews, which I believe are representative of the contradictions inherent within the culture.

What follows are “portraits” of Rhoda, David and Stephanie. These portraits generally include all major topics discussed during the interviews. Consultants are quoted extensively in order to provide them space to speak for themselves so that the reader can then better judge on what grounds my conclusions are drawn. As James Clifford argues, “greater prominence given to transcribed materials can produce a more polyphonic final ethnography” (1990: 57). I purposely refrain from drawing comparisons to other consultants’ comments and I resist drawing conclusions until the analysis in Chapter 6. While relevant passages might have simply been quoted in my analysis, I

want readers to have a sense of the personalities of the people interviewed and of the context in which responses were made. It may be easier to understand why people have different opinions about puirt-a-beul when one understands their opinions regarding other aspects of Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

4.1 Rhoda MacRitchie

I met Rhoda through a Gaelic Language and Song day held in Toronto in October 1997. She was teaching the intermediate students, of which I was one. It was clear to me that she had a passion for Gaelic and she delighted in teaching a roomful of people interested in Gaelic language and culture. At the day's end, all the students came together to learn and sing Gaelic songs under the tutelage of Lorrie MacKinnon, who organizes these day-long workshops. Lorrie occasionally checked lyrics with Rhoda, from which I concluded that Rhoda must be reasonably familiar with Gaelic song. I approached her afterwards and mentioned my research. When asked for an interview, she hesitated for a moment before agreeing.

However, I waited until February 2 to interview Rhoda since, at the time that we met, my thesis topic was not yet thoroughly formulated. I was somewhat nervous repeating my solicitation since I had become aware that Rhoda had often been troubled, as she said,

by many trivial requests to translate strange names for houses, boats, etc. into Gaelic from people with little interest or investment in the language. I just have to say no because I could be spending half my time. And many of them have no interest. I know from the start that it's a waste of time for their part and mine

because they don't have it. They haven't a clue what Gaelic is! They wouldn't recognize a word of Gaelic.¹

However, Rhoda kindly agreed to be interviewed. Her comments influenced my understanding of *puirt-a-beul* because she was only the second person, and the first Scot, I had interviewed. Rhoda emigrated in 1967 to Toronto from the Isle of Harris in Scotland. She is a native Gaelic speaker and continues to teach Gaelic language workshops in Canada and the U.S.. At one time, she also taught Gaelic in continuing education evening classes. Apparent, there were so many students taking beginning Gaelic that “they were literally hanging from the pipes, the room was filled with people, all eager to learn.” Although Rhoda acknowledged that the attrition rate was quite high, she said there were always quite a few who continued studying the language. Rhoda claimed, “I don't care what stage a learner is at as long as they speak my beloved language! Even a few phrases!”

Although Rhoda has spent more than half her life in Canada, she said, “I [still] think in Gaelic, I play Gaelic tapes in the car. I read Gaelic poetry.” Rhoda retired from her position as an English teacher in June 1999.

Rhoda began our interview by playing a recording of a radio program broadcast by *Raideo nan Gaidheal* (around 1995) featuring interviewer Angela MacEachern and Kenna Campbell, a Scottish woman famous for her *puirt-a-beul*. Rhoda translated it for me as it played. Kenna argued that *puirt-a-beul* and piping were developed

¹ Consultants' quotes – here and as elsewhere in this thesis – refer to interviews recorded on individual cassettes (as indicated in the list of interviews), filed according to consultant name and

simultaneously and therefore puirt-a-beul resembles the music of the bagpipe chanter. While Kenna is aware that many people believe puirt-a-beul evolved after the Battle of Culloden (1746), Kenna thinks that the Battle simply increased the opportunity to sing puirt-a-beul.

Kenna sounded uncomfortable when asked whether there was a right and wrong way to sing a port-a-beul, but she did say that if one cannot dance to one, it is not a port. She added that puirt-a-beul are meant to accompany dance and that those puirt-a-beul which have unusual rhythms probably once accompanied particular dances which are now no longer remembered. Kenna elucidated that there is “music in the words and the words were chosen specifically to fit the steps of a dance.”

Kenna explained that breathing is fundamental to proper puirt-a-beul performance. The singer must take an enormous breath at the beginning, and then snatch breaths as necessary while singing the tune. While breathing in puirt-a-beul may be difficult for everyone, the rhythms, according to Kenna, are only difficult for singers unfamiliar with the piping tradition. Kenna suggests that puirt-a-beul are more problematic for Gaelic learners than for native speakers.

As Kenna sang examples of puirt-a-beul, Rhoda demonstrated the dance steps that they would accompany. She also translated some of the lyrics sung by Kenna, commenting that, “they’re not about anything serious And [the lyrics are] repeated—you notice the repetition—the same line is repeated over and over again. They’re very

date of interview.

light; there's never much content to them." Rhoda later added, "they weren't composed by great bards. As a composition, they're really not of any great merit. But the merit lies in the fitting the word to the tune and getting them to fit absolutely correctly." The meaning of the lyrics are of little consequence to Rhoda. For her, the value of puirt-a-beul is in their performance and in their composition: the lyrics' ability to portray an instrumental tune exactly. The rhythm of the words matches the rhythm of the dance. Rhoda explained, "the words are fairly unimportant although it's also necessary to get your tongue around them. You really have to grasp them and get your tongue around them." Thus, while the meaning of the words is of little relevance, their pronunciation is of prime importance.

At the conclusion of Kenna's interview, Rhoda mentioned that one of Kenna's daughters, Maryanne, also a noted puirt-a-beul singer, had once adjudicated at the Ontario Mòd. Our discussion turned to Mòds and the adjudication of puirt-a-beul. Rhoda explained that at the Royal National Mòd in Scotland, puirt-a-beul are judged on "correct beat and time—and breathing." In the context of the Mòd, the "words/phrases must fit the music/beat exactly." Rhoda had never adjudicated puirt-a-beul in the Ontario Mòd (since it never had a specific puirt-a-beul competition), but she said,

I'm quite critical when I hear it because I used to sing—not like Kenna, let me hasten to add—but it was a form of music that I really enjoyed, myself. I also love bagpipe music. I used to always go to piping competitions. So I have the beat, the rhythm in my head. So it makes it easier for me.

Like Kenna, Rhoda perceives a connection between the rhythm and beat of pipe music and puirt-a-beul. She demonstrated the differences between good and poor puirt-a-beul

performances. First, Rhoda sang a port-a-beul with the words drawn out, as she feels some inexperienced Gaelic singers do. She then sang the port-a-beul as she would normally, quick and clipped.

While we were on the subject of Mòds, Rhoda described how

There used to be two camps at the Mòd, the national Mòd: those who'd learn it—as they say—parrot fashion... But I don't agree with that; most learners—perhaps their first competition it was done phonetically, without a real understanding of the language, they'd understand the song they were singing—they'd need that to put the proper expression—but I can think of several who went on from being learners to learn the language and sing beautifully in it now. ...What I think many Gaelic speakers felt about the Mòd was that people trained for it. You had voice lessons. You had lessons in presentation, sometimes with accompaniment. And they felt that there was no provision for the real Gaelic singers—these were the traditional singers who sang the songs composed by the village bards about various incidents. But in the past probably 10-15 years, they have a traditional singing section at the Mòd. And, in the mind of some people, that has more prestige than the gold medal. The gold medal is sort of the concert type of presentation. The traditional—you could imagine it at a ceilidh with somebody sort of thumping their feet in time. And I like both.

In other words, one does not prepare for the “traditional” category in the same way as one would prepare for the “gold medal” category. Of course, traditional singers do prepare for the Mòd. However, Rhoda appears to mean that traditional singers learn by constant exposure to Gaelic song and by singing frequently at ceilidhs and other Gaelic song events, rather than by taking formal lessons. And Rhoda is content to find value in both types of training and the resulting performances.

By this point in the interview, it was clear that Rhoda was quite familiar with puirt-a-beul. However, I had already spoken to one person well-versed in Cape Breton Gaelic culture who belittled puirt-a-beul and argued that many native Gaelic speakers in

Cape Breton would do the same. Asked if this was the attitude of Scottish Gaels as well, Rhoda cried, “Oh no, no! Everyone loves puirt-a-beul. If they’re sung properly, everybody loves them. If I were to go back to the Hebrides, the old people would love the puirt.”

However much Scottish Gaels may love puirt-a-beul though, Rhoda does not believe that they are currently being composed. At one time, she explained, puirt-a-beul were composed to commemorate a particular event: “if there was an occasion—in Kenna’s port, *Biodag air MacThòmais*,² the man who strutted about in buckled shoes with his dagger or sword at his side is being ridiculed—then they would compose a little ditty to go with that.”

We also discussed puirt-a-beul’s connection to dance. Rhoda told me of a time when she herself had witnessed a wedding barn dance accompanied by puirt-a-beul and, on another occasion, she observed a “very polished team of Scottish country dancers perform at a concert to puirt-a-beul sung by Angus Macleod.” Rhoda named the dances which were once regularly accompanied by puirt-a-beul: the foursome reel, the eightsome reel, the Highland Scottische, and the wedding dance, *Dannsa na Caraid* (“The Couple’s Dance”), danced by the bride, groom, best man, and maid of honour.

Rhoda herself has sung puirt-a-beul unaccompanied, but she also described how she had sung puirt-a-beul accompanied by a band. Rhoda felt the instrumental accompaniment was “rather nice because, for the singer, it gives you a chance to snatch a

² Cf. Chapter 6.4.b for the lyrics and translation of “*Biodag air Mac Thòmais*.”

breath, whereas if you're doing it unaccompanied, there's nothing worse than gulping for breath in the middle of the line." The difficulty posed by breathing is circumvented by taking advantage of instrumental accompaniment to fill in any gaps that might result from the singer's breaths.

Through casual conversations with other Gaelic speakers and learner, I had become aware that some people disagree with the addition of instrumental accompaniment to Gaelic song. In response to my request for her opinion, Rhoda answered,

I think Marjory Kennedy-Fraser³ did a marvelous thing. She went around the islands, she collected these songs, she brought them to the notice of audiences far beyond the Highland region. You would have very highly trained and very polished performers present them in the concert halls in London. So, in doing that, she drew a lot of attention to them. She embellished them, she refined them. Some people don't like the refinement. When you hear some in their original form, they're quite different. And each type has its own charm.

As far as Rhoda is concerned, Kennedy-Fraser's transformation of Gaelic folksong into parlour songs sung by well-respected singers resulted in Gaelic song's legitimization.

³ Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's Gaelic song publications are controversial:

Though she [Kennedy-Fraser] herself declared these to be art songs, which they are, they have been continually misrepresented by her devotees as the genuine folksongs of the Hebrides, which they are not. Many of them consist of traditional Gaelic melodies with words by Fraser herself or by Kenneth Macleod [sic] on themes totally different from the original ones. As the original folk versions are still sung in the Hebrides in their proper form, Fraser's songs are a source of endless confusion. In some cases the rhythm and scope of both words and music of the original song, as she collected it, are altered out of all recognition in her arrangement; and other formal transmutations make it impossible to accord these the status of folksongs. Her volumes, though interesting on their own account, disappoint and frustrate the serious student of folksong (Francis Collinson, "Scotland: Folk Music: Gaelic Song," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 1980).

Presumably, as non-Gaelic speaking audiences became aware of the culture, support for it increased as well.

Rhoda thinks that she learned her first port-a-beul in school, although she could not remember what it was. She also learned puirt-a-beul from her grandmother who

was a very good singer. ... she was very much in demand at weddings and [on] occasions like that, she sang puirt. She would come to the house and if there were any babies present, she would dandle them on her knee and sing puirt to them. And then when I used to go to ceilidhs and concerts, I thought puirt were great. They livened up the audience.

First, it is important to note that a “good” singer may sing puirt-a-beul. Rhoda does not necessarily associate puirt-a-beul with poor singers or Gaelic language learners.

Furthermore, it is significant that Rhoda associates puirt-a-beul with singers. Rhoda, herself a singer, learned some of her earliest puirt-a-beul repertoire from her grandmother, also a singer. Rhoda did not mention learning puirt-a-beul from fiddlers or pipers. At this point, Rhoda has identified several appropriate venues or contexts for puirt-a-beul, including weddings, concerts, and ceilidhs. In fact, Rhoda even mentioned that puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dancing after a gruelling waulking: “After the tweed was waulked thoroughly and everything put away, they would occasionally have a dance. And then, they would have the puirt-a-beul if there wasn’t a piper or concertina-player around.”

It is also interesting that while Rhoda defined puirt-a-beul as dance music, her grandmother also sang them to infants. A few people had told me that diddling, rather than puirt-a-beul, was sung to infants; Rhoda concurred that some people “used to diddle

for children. You know, if you had them on your knee and sang to them.” While Rhoda suggests that *puirt-a-beul* could be used with dance *or* with children, diddling does not seem to play the same double-duty.

Since Rhoda’s interview was conducted early in my research, I did not yet have a grasp of the differences among Gaelic song types. For example, milling songs and *puirt-a-beul* are both extremely rhythmic and make use of vocables. What is the difference? Rhoda explained, “you couldn’t dance to a waulking song” because the tempos are too different; *puirt-a-beul* are much faster than milling songs. Asked if she could tell the difference between the two if she only saw them in print, thereby eliminating the opportunity to guess based on tempo and instead identifying melodic, rhythmic, or lyric cues, she replied,

You could judge from the sound of the words. You see, that one [referring to a song she just sang for me], “*na horo hì rin an*,” the words are too slow, they don’t have that snap to it. A *puirt-a-beul* has to have a certain snap to it whereas the waulking song has to have a beat. You see, that’s the rhythm of the waulking song.

Rhoda identifies the *sound* of the words rather than their semantic meaning. The sound of the words determines the manner in which they will be sung and therefore identifies the song genre. The Gaelic language is inextricably linked with musical rhythm.

While Rhoda has never lived in Cape Breton, she once participated in a Cape Breton milling frolic, and she had heard Cape Breton Gaelic singers at the Ontario Mòd. She described their singing:

In Cape Breton, the older people speak a wonderful language. Their singing, to me, has the old, authentic ring to it. ... And, to me, they’re the very essence of

Gaelic singing. Songs that have been almost forgotten in Scotland resurface in Cape Breton.

Rhoda explained that Cape Breton singing has a certain *blas* (Gaelic for “flavour” or “accent”). She also talked about the Cape Breton Gaelic singers still having a vigour to their singing which she implied was lacking in Scotland. She also mentioned that Cape Breton singers still sometimes hold and swing one another’s hands, which was once practised at weddings in the Isle of Harris, Scotland.

4.2 David Livingston-Lowe

David has been my Gaelic language instructor for two years. He and his wife, Deborah, teach Saturday morning Gaelic interest classes at the intermediate and beginner levels respectively. David also occasionally teaches an introductory Scots Gaelic language and grammar class through the Celtic Studies Program at the University of Toronto. Additionally, he teaches at the Gaelic and Language days (*Cànan is Òran*) sponsored by Mòd Ontario. I have been his student in all of these classes.

Although David does not profess to be a singer, he uses songs in the classroom. He has made a point of studying the Presbyterian Gaelic psalm singing in the Hebrides. He also has a great love for Cape Breton Gaelic culture. He attended St. Ann’s Gaelic College from 1993-1996 and was there again in 1998. Whenever the topic of Cape Breton was raised in conversation, he seemed to have a thorough understanding of the culture while still being aware of the gaps in his knowledge.

I did not immediately think to interview David about puirt-a-beul since he is not a singer. However, as I continued to learn puirt-a-beul in his classes, I eventually realized that he could prove to be a valuable resource. David, an unassuming man, agreed to be interviewed after protesting that he could not be considered any sort of expert on the culture. The interview proved to be illuminating because David's answers were thoughtful, informed, thorough and articulate.

David is fluent in both Irish and Scots Gaelic. His Irish Gaelic education began when he did his undergraduate degree in Celtic Studies at the University of Toronto. He learned Scots Gaelic on his own. In 1992, several years after completing his degree, David realized that he missed the Gaelic languages. He had invested a substantial amount of time learning them but was not using them. Therefore, in 1993 he made his first trip to Cape Breton, where, for the first time, he spoke Gaelic to someone outside of a classroom environment. He also discovered the Gaelic College, where he took classes for three weeks.

In order to maintain contact with Gaelic culture while in Toronto, David became a member of the Gaelic Society. He also became involved with Gaelic language and song workshops which were held a few times each year:

There were a few of us who were young and keen in that period: 1993. We worked on a project—well, actually, I came on it a little later and ended up running it—which was these Gaelic language workshops. We felt that there was an interest in things Celtic; we could see that people were interested in the language ... so a few of us ... took to doing this and it's been successful: it's been going on five years, those workshops. It's a way of involving people who aren't learning Gaelic actively. Or they're learning it at home and maybe don't have time to come to classes. It's a way of promoting Gaelic and a lot of out students

who come to our regular classes started in those workshops. ... A few of us got involved in the beginning but there's been a turnover in who's been running them. But it's been great that that's been continuing; we can see that that's been beneficial.

When the Board of Education cut minority language instruction from their continuing education program, David and Deborah decided to start their own classes. The University of Toronto provides classroom space in exchange for instruction for University of Toronto students (particularly since the Celtic Studies Program only offers the introductory Scots Gaelic credit course irregularly). These non-credit classes currently run Saturday mornings and tend to attract adult learners.

In 1995, David spent some time at two Gaelic Colleges in Scotland (*Sabhal Mòr Ostaig* and *An Ceathramh*). He prefers the Cape Breton Gaelic College experience because students interact with Gaels from the community:

Evenings would be ceilidhs, either at the college itself or out in the community. ... It always seemed that when I was there that there would be one on the North Shore or somewhere else. So you're always aware that there are things going on. And you carpool and you go to these places where you meet the older Gaels. You get a chance to go up and talk to them and ask them questions. And they're probably very understanding and patient people to be able to do that because it can be annoying to have all these strangers coming up to you and trying out their Gaelic. But they always seemed to be there; there was a core group of them. I learned a lot.

David did not feel that the same opportunities for interaction with native Gaelic speakers existed at the Gaelic colleges in Scotland.

Asked how he first became involved in Gaelic song, David explained that, aside from listening to the occasional recording, he only really began learning songs at the St. Ann's Gaelic College:

I really started learning when I went down [to the College] and had some teachers to coach me and get me started: somebody to give you insight into how these songs are sung. You can listen to them but then your interpretation of them might not be quite what you would like it to be without someone telling you that, for example, the music should conform to the words of the song and not necessarily the other way around. You need someone to tell you that kind of thing, to explain why the metre of a song seems to keep changing. Why is one verse sung very differently—or played very differently—than another (if it's on a fiddle or something). Well, there's linguistic reasons why. I think it's good to have knowledgeable coaches to help me with that.

The need for a coach suggests that Gaelic song operates under different rules than the English songs with which David is familiar and that Gaelic songs are sophisticated enough to require assistance from a cultural insider. Already, David has indicated an important relationship between Gaelic language and music; this concept was emphasized throughout our interview.

David recalled that the Gaelic College curriculum involved a lot of music. Hector MacNeil, one of the instructors, taught David several milling songs. Another instructor, Catriona Parsons, conducted a choir that included a variety of Gaelic song types. David detailed why music is an integral part of the Gaelic College's program:

I learned many songs down in Cape Breton. That's because they have the right focus there: it's music and language. It doesn't matter who your teacher is at the college; they all have that focus. They might have different areas of interest in Gaelic song but they all have the same concept which is that music helps you learn the language and it enriches your vocabulary and enriches your cultural knowledge. By doing the language, you're enabling yourself to understand songs which you're coming up to. One feeds into the other.

Because language and music are intertwined in Gaelic culture, song is an invaluable part of the language learning process. David has not only learned Gaelic in part through song, but also taught Gaelic through song.

But while David believes that song is a helpful pedagogical tool, he understands that its use in the classroom is a modern necessity, rather than customary:

That's not the way things were traditionally: people just learned them. But traditionally, people were surrounded by all this stuff. We're in a minority culture, it's a minority language and, despite the revival, statistics show that it's a dying language and a dying culture. That means that we have to actively learn it; it's not passive learning. So that's where I got started.

At one time, Gaels may have learned songs without any special effort since they would have heard many songs performed repeatedly. Gaelic songs are simply not common enough today to learn passively, especially for students from outside Cape Breton, such as David himself. Although David believes that Gaelic song has always had an established place within Gaelic culture, he recognizes that the culture has changed and therefore the use and value of Gaelic songs have changed too.

The connection between language and song, particularly in terms of pedagogical instruction, is emphasized by others as well. David noted that:

[B&R Heritage Enterprises] also have that same focus: language and song. [Rosemary McCormack, B&R Heritage Enterprises partner] has put out some recordings that are specifically geared to helping people to understand and learn the language. Just look at the liner notes. You can tell that it's different from anything coming out of Scotland. You have to hunt down the lyrics to Gaelic songs from Gaelic albums in Scotland, for the most part. Anything B&R puts out has full text, both languages. The idea is that they know why you're interested: you want to be able to learn the song. You don't just want a translated version of the song. They've gone one step further by putting out tuition tapes where you will hear a tradition-bearer from Cape Breton sing a song and then the words would be spoken slowly and then they'd sing it again and say it slowly. They've done one of those and hopefully they'll do another. It's clear that their focus is not only enjoyment—I mean, they're putting out musical recordings—but it's education as well.

The enjoyment of Gaelic songs can be harnessed for pedagogical purposes. B&R Heritage recordings combine aural and print transmission. One can read the words as one hears their pronunciation. One can also learn vocabulary by comparing the Gaelic lyrics to their translations.

However, the use of song for Gaelic language instruction is not based simply on its usefulness and enjoyment. As David explained earlier, song and language are an inextricable part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture:

Traditionally, [song] was central. Maybe it's even more central now. I think song seems to be, in this culture and I'm sure in many other cultures around the world—it's gotta be the same thing—community song singing is a way of bringing the community together. I think it's more a psychological thing. People just enjoy it. Somehow it's some kind of sharing of cultural inheritance, isn't it? It's a symbolic act which brings people together so, at the heart of it, that's what song is for any of these kinds of communities.

Because David was always taught Gaelic songs as he learned the language and because he believes the two are inseparable, David also incorporates song in his teaching. The *Cànan is Oran* (Language and Song) workshops were developed keeping the connection between language and song in mind:

That was a way of teaching language and song together which surely—as far as Celtic is concerned—go together. It wouldn't have seemed right to do just a day of language without song. A day of song, actually, wouldn't be bad. But I think that it's important that the language is there. And it's what makes our efforts, I think, maybe unique. I think they're centred right where they should be.

David also includes songs in his Saturday non-credit classes:

I think that one thing I have in mind is teaching children's songs. It's not necessarily something I do at home, myself, although I suppose I have taught them to myself, but I feel that as adult learners, we're playing a little bit of catch-up. The children's songs are songs that children know so it's good to know them.

All English speakers probably know “Ring Around the Rosie.” You may not sing it to yourself, but you know it. It’s just part of that cultural background. So we do the silly songs like, “S ann an Ìle,” and “Brochan Lom.” Partly because they’re part of that children’s musical vocabulary but also because they’re simple and easy to learn. You can also pick apart some simple grammar from them. So if I have a purpose on Saturday mornings in terms of that, it’s to maybe use it as a jump-start, talking a little bit about the language. Also, getting some of those simple children’s songs which we probably should be familiar with. If we do anything beyond that, it’s really there just to enrich the experience and to encourage people to go beyond it but I think that the next step really has to be their own.

It is noteworthy that David identifies “S ann an Ìle” and “Brochan Lom” as children’s songs since they are titles of *puirt-a-beul* (both are included in K.N. MacDonald’s *Puirt-a-Beul*). Second, David appears to recognize *puirt-a-beul*/children’s songs by their simplicity, particularly their grammar, but also, he suggests, by their vocabulary. He uses them in the classroom because they are accessible lyrically. Students enjoy learning a song and can be introduced to new vocabulary in the process. Lyrics may indicate a particular aspect of the culture (e.g., they may commemorate an important historical event or describe a cultural value). *Puirt-a-beul* are ideal for learners since their simple lyrics are not overwhelming.

Not only is song a valuable part of language instruction itself, but it also acts as a cultural entry point for outsiders:

The way it is today, music in the Celtic scene has become our prime focus because it’s the trendy music right now. Unfortunately, because the language is at such a low ebb, music is what we have left so I think it’s even more important now. More important because, for many people, it’s easier to learn a song than the language that goes behind it. So I think music is given that much more of an importance. We see the Rankin Family, or even Ashley MacIsaac, all of whom give lip-service to Gaelic—they’re not Gaelic-speakers themselves—it would be great if they would take that a step further but that’s up to them. But, actually,

those people have been inspirations for some people who've come to our classes and some of our workshops. They say, "I want to learn Gaelic because The Rankin Family sings some songs in Gaelic." That's encouraging that that's happening. But I think that means that song is even much more important as far as reaching people for the language right now. I don't want to place too much emphasis on song but I think that's where it is right now. Look at the East Coast Music Awards. There's a Celtic craze happening right now. We should enjoy it while it's here because the language is benefiting a little bit from it.

Whether or not recording artists actually speak Gaelic, the fact that they sing in Gaelic inspires people who are attracted to their music to attempt to learn something about the language. While David carefully avoids discussing the musical value of recordings by artists such as The Rankin Family and Ashley MacIsaac, he is quick to acknowledge the part they play in drawing people to Gaelic language, advancing the survival of the language while also promoting cultural awareness.

John Shaw's "Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: Views from Gaeldom and Beyond" (1992/3) based on ethnographic interviews conducted in Cape Breton, indicates that the level of a musician's Gaelic fluency may have a profound effect on that musician's instrumental music. Since David mentioned that Ashley MacIsaac is not a fluent Gaelic speaker, I asked where he stands in this controversy. David acknowledged both sides:

There's this debate going on in musical circles, whether it's fiddling or piping right now—I think it's a great debate—as to whether you can really be a tradition-bearer, play traditional music, Gaelic music, without speaking the Gaelic language. I suppose that language advocates are saying, "No, you can't. You don't know how to play the music unless you know the words and the meaning behind the words." Because of all those things we were talking about: the way a line is intoned when it's sung or the way a line is played in music depends on what the words were behind that. So that's at the heart of the debate. But the other side of the debate is, "Look, this is an instrument ... You shouldn't be told—

and we don't want to be told—how to play by someone who doesn't play that instrument.” So there's two camps. The middle ground is that there is a small but apparently growing number of musicians themselves who are of the opinion that you do need to have the language to play the music the way it's intended to be played. That shouldn't inhibit artistic freedom, but you need to have the people to play the tradition or the tradition's gone. And then no one has anybody to rely on anymore. So I think those few people are going to be really important.

David identifies three perspectives: fluent Gaelic speakers who are not musicians but who believe that “proper” renditions of traditional tunes can only be realized by Gaelic-speaking musicians; musicians who do not speak Gaelic but believe they are fully competent performers without the language; and Gaelic-speaking musicians.

David explained further:

Although I'm clearly in the language camp, I take a middle road in terms of how the musical tradition goes. I think it's a hopeless enterprise to try to tell artists what they should be doing with their music. They just have to go and do it and I don't think you can preach at them. I don't think it's going to work. I've seen it tried and I've tried it myself. People get their backs up when you try to attack what they do. Tradition changes. There's nothing you can do about that, even if you lament it, there's nothing you can do about it. I like the new stuff that's coming out. There's all kinds of people you could think of. Look at Runrig. They're not a traditional band. Or Talitha MacKenzie from Mouth Music. They're taking Gaelic music to places where it's never been and it's wonderful stuff. It's great to hear. But they surely would have to admit that they couldn't do what they're doing without the tradition-bearers. What we must have is the tradition-bearers and I think there will always be people to take tradition and mold it. I think both sides are great but one is core. You have to have someone who knows how to play it the way it's always been played in order for someone else to be able to take it somewhere. Otherwise, you just have somebody who sings their interpretation of a song based on someone else's modern interpretation of a song and it's going to sound horrible. When these modern interpretations are good, it's when you know that the person singing it has already studied a little bit. They know what they're doing. And they know why they're changing it.

So while David accepts that traditions change and he appreciates how Gaelic song traditions have changed, he also believes that traditional styles of playing and singing

must be maintained. David does not see it as an either-or situation. Not all musicians must be traditional performers. But he believes that those who choose to move beyond the tradition should have a solid grounding in traditional music. Traditional performance can only be learned if there are traditional musicians available from whom to learn.

David is, however, concerned that traditional performance styles will not remain actively practised for much longer:

I think the worst threat to the music and the culture right now is the fact that the people who are the tradition-bearers are very old. And I think age is the worst threat right now. If all people had world music recordings of Gaelic music, I don't think people would be singing it at all. I think they would find it an interesting recording. When I listen to the recordings I have of world-beat Gaelic stuff, I like to hear it but I'm not sure that would inspire me to learn it. I'm not sure if I even could learn it from that medium. Gaelic song was traditionally unaccompanied. That's not how they're being played now. I'm not sure that the tradition is that much in trouble apart from the fact that it's aging. But there are younger people who are taking an interest. I think we're in an intermediate stage and it's hard to see where it's all going. It seems to me, if there's a large enough body of young people who are learning the songs, then they are learning them in a traditional manner right now, so I'm not sure if it's in danger right now. ... I think that if the language dies, the songs will die. Nobody even knows what Roman folk melodies were like because it's a dead language. If Gaelic becomes a dead language, the songs will die. [Recordings] will be museum pieces in the archives and the music library. People will move on to other things.

So long as people continue learning the traditional means of singing and playing music, then David feels hopeful for the future of Gaelic culture. If those people are not there, then the culture and language will disappear, even if the songs are recorded. Earlier, David pointed out that, as a cultural outsider, he felt the need to be coached in song by cultural insiders. If those cultural insiders cease to exist, he wonders how anyone could learn to sing Gaelic songs, even if songs continue to exist on world-beat recordings.

Because Gaelic language and music are inextricably intertwined, the loss of one means the inevitable loss of the other. On a more personal level, David has a vested interest in the Gaelic language, because of his family heritage, the years he spent learning Gaelic, and the fact that he teaches it.

Turning our conversation towards the focus of my interest, I asked David what he understood *puirt-a-beul*'s origins and function to be:

I don't think my ideas would be any different from any others because I got them from others. But what I understand is that *puirt-a-beul* has very simple and humble origins in that it was to be danced to. If you were going to dance—which was also part of the culture—then you needed someone to keep the rhythm and someone to keep time. And this kind of mouth music developed with nonsense words to accompany that. I suppose the stereotype of *puirt-a-beul* was that it was after the so-called “proscription” of the pipes and musical instruments and trappings of Gaelic culture. So they were forced to come up with vocables that would allow them to dance. That's the story. But maybe the truth is more likely that you wouldn't always have a musical instrument nearby and maybe people always did this kind of mouth music. Who knows? Perhaps with the discouragement of traditional instruments mouth music became more necessary. But I'm kind of sceptical about all that. I think a number of factors came together. I don't want to overemphasize one of them.

David here defines *puirt-a-beul* as dance music. While he is ambivalent about when exactly *puirt-a-beul* came into existence, he later speculates that some *puirt-a-beul* may have developed *after* instruments: “there's sounds that developed and some of them ended up looking like real words but really they were originally imitating the sounds of the fiddle or the pipe. Some of them certainly sound like that to me, they sound like imitations of instruments.” Additionally, David describes *puirt-a-beul* lyrics as having originally consisted of vocables but earlier he talked about the vocabulary (albeit simple) of *puirt-a-beul* like “S ann an Ile” and “Brochan Lom.”

David is also familiar with the theory that puirt-a-beul were invented after the Presbyterian church proscribed musical instruments in general:

Also the church, they say, played a role because the church did have a proscription on musical instruments. But even that's debatable. I've read articles where they say that "no, that's not true." There'll be somebody who was the Free-Church minister of a certain parish and there'll be a line in someone's contemporary biography of the man that says that he was the best fiddler in the whole region or whatever. And you think, "what happened to the church's proscription? Maybe there wasn't one." Once again, there's the stereotype that the church said, "no musical instruments," but the reality was probably otherwise. Maybe [the proscription] was a little quieter, maybe it wasn't as common, but it probably was still there. That's one of the other reasons why people say that puirt-a-beul might have developed because the instruments just weren't being played.

Once again, David opts for a more moderate position.

David continued discussing the proscription of dance music by the Presbyterian church:

The other story you get is that there were burning of fiddles, which also never happened. There might have been one story where a guy said he burned his fiddle. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. But that became blown up to be a big thing. You could just understand that in a culture where the playing of instrumental music was frowned on, you could see something like puirt-a-beul developing. It's probably a contributor, but I doubt any of those are the main reasons.

David is hesitant to advocate any one theory. Although he sees that each situation may have produced conditions that would have promoted puirt-a-beul, he is reluctant to suggest that puirt-a-beul originated as a result of any one event. Perhaps puirt-a-beul grew in popularity and importance with each event.

David was even familiar with the theory that puirt-a-beul vocables may have developed from a lost language:

Someone in my days of linguistics mentioned to me that someone had come up with a theory somewhere—I don't know where it is, it may not even be published—it all sounds kind of bogus but fun—that maybe there was a Pictish substratum here. And that surely explains where these nonsense choruses came from, surrounded by Gaelic language verses but the original song would've been something pre-Gaelic. That's the kind of stuff that's fun to think about but I don't think it would hold any academic weight. It would be fun to see if that person ever wrote an article on it.

In other words, vocables may be the unrecognizable remains of a lost Pictish language, around which more recognizable Gaelic words were added. Unfortunately, because so little about the Picts is known, it would be difficult to substantiate this theory.

By the time David was interviewed, I had become aware of the use of vocables in many different types of Gaelic song. Asked whether there was a difference between puirt-a-beul vocables and milling song vocables, David replied,

If I could say anything, I would say that the vocables in milling songs are sometimes longer, there are longer runs of them. This is just an impression. In puirt-a-beul, they seem to be a bit shorter and choppier, don't they? But then that's dance music, isn't it? Whereas in milling songs, it's not short and choppy. You're doing a rhythm, but you're also performing a task that involves bashing and pushing and shoving. So you can see that if all of these things, say both traditions came out of the same kind of origin which is nonsense vocables to accompany some kind of activity, then if that's the case, you can imagine why the syllables would be longer in milling than in puirt-a-beul. It just makes immediate logical sense. If I have any impression about differences, it would be that.

David's assertion that there are indeed differences between puirt-a-beul vocables and milling song vocables supports my own observations. Whether or not this is related to the function of each song genre is uncertain, although there is merit in David's suggestion that longer runs of vocables are appropriate for the pull-push-pull-pass movement of the

milling cloth. Also, shorter vocable sequences could contribute to a musical lightness appropriate for dancing.

The comparison between milling songs and puirt-a-beul led me to ask David why he thought milling songs were so much more popular than all other Gaelic song types in Cape Breton. He answered,

Because it's a group activity. Everybody's there to do the song together. Maybe that's got something to do with it. Because puirt-a-beul is an individual act whereas the milling frolic, everybody does it together. It's easier, isn't it, in that sense to learn them.

David mentioned earlier that singing Gaelic songs creates community, and here he identifies milling songs as particularly useful for establishing group cohesion. Milling frolics are social events; the songs provide the excuse for coming together. Puirt-a-beul performances, which now tend to occur in concert situations, are presumably sung for the music's sake instead.

Asked where he had heard puirt-a-beul being performed, David answered,

I haven't heard puirt-a-beul at milling frolics. Where I've heard puirt-a-beul is from the teachers—Catriona Parsons, who's from Lewis. I've also heard puirt-a-beul sung by Mary Jane Lamond, but then she's a performer and has learned puirt-a-beul anyway. Actually, that's not true. I heard puirt-a-beul once at a milling frolic. ... It was at a milling table and it was [a young person's] turn to maybe sing a song for the group and he sang "Tha bean agam" ("I have a wife"). There's my only example!

Note first that puirt-a-beul are not sung at milling frolics where Gaelic speakers (of varying levels) congregate. Perhaps David would argue that puirt-a-beul are not appropriate in the milling frolic context since they are solo songs rather than group songs. Puirt-a-beul performance venues are discussed further in Chapter 6.2. Second, puirt-a-

beul are sung by Gaelic language teachers, such as Catriona Parsons, rather than by lay people. David had already indicated the pedagogical value of puirt-a-beul so it is not surprising that a teacher would know puirt-a-beul while an average person in the Gaelic culture may or may not know any. Furthermore, Catriona is not from Cape Breton and therefore her puirt-a-beul are not necessarily indicative of Cape Breton's puirt-a-beul practice and repertoire. Third, puirt-a-beul are sung by professional singers, such as Mary Jane Lamond. Mary Jane is not even a native Cape Bretoner or Gaelic speaker and therefore had to make a conscious effort to learn as much as she could about Gaelic culture, a part of which presumably was puirt-a-beul. Again, this is not necessarily indicative of the general practice of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton.

The only time David heard puirt-a-beul in the milling frolic context and by someone competent in the language was when he observed a teenager perform one. Because it was an isolated incident, and because the teenager may have purposely chosen a song which would not normally be considered appropriate for a milling frolic, this particular incident cannot be deemed representative of the general use of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton either.

David's understanding of puirt-a-beul as dance music was reinforced when he, as part of Catriona's Gaelic College choir, sang a set of puirt-a-beul to accompany Scottish country dancing. David described the experience:

At one of the weeks at the Gaelic College we were to learn some puirt-a-beul—I think it was a run of maybe three puirt-a-beul—and the country dancing class was to dance to us. Or we were to sing to their dancing. The people in the group were of different abilities and different levels of Gaelic so it was a challenge just to

learn the stuff by the end of the week. I think everyone had fun with it, though. But what we discovered, though, was that we'd been learning these things at the end of every day and practising them, trying to put them together so they'd come in a run, one after the other. I can't remember exactly what the group danced to. But what we found out when we practised with them, either that morning or the night before, we needed to speed it up about three times just so they could acceptably dance to it. That was a learning experience. It probably explains why people take such a pride in puirt-a-beul. To be able to do it, and to do it well and quickly: that clearly is part of the art of it. You can see how that would have developed. Because it has to be fast. It's not just to try to get your tongue around tongue-twisters or just to prove your ability to do it—that's the way it has to be done, to be danced to. That was a good learning experience. I don't think I would've learned it any other way so I'm glad to have had that. ... It was probably a first for most people there that day.

It is interesting that the choir sang puirt-a-beul to accompany Scottish country dancing, rather than Cape Breton step dancing. While this is not entirely surprising in view of Catriona's Scottish roots, it is intriguing in view of Cape Bretoners' insistence that puirt-a-beul accompanied step dancing. Scottish country dancing is not widely practised in Cape Breton, although instruction is available at the Gaelic College, in addition to step dancing lessons.

Through the experience of accompanying dancing with puirt-a-beul, David began to appreciate the sophistication required to sing them, despite their simple lyrics. In particular, David highlighted the difficulty of enunciating the words clearly when sung at a danceable tempo.

When David first heard about my research on puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton, he suggested that it would be a struggle to find information. Ultimately, he seems to have been warning me that puirt-a-beul are rarely heard amongst native Cape Breton Gaels.

And while that may indeed be the case, learners and teachers of the language and culture are, like him, in fact using *puirt-a-beul* in a variety of ways for a number of purposes.

4.3 Stephanie Conn

Early in my graduate work, one of my colleagues heard of my interest in Celtic music and mentioned the Toronto group, Puirt-a-Baroque. The group performs Scottish Baroque music. Because the group's name is a play on the term *puirt-a-beul*, I assumed that Puirt-a-Baroque would include *puirt-a-beul* but their first two recordings include only three musicians: David Greenberg on violin, Terry McKenna on guitar and lute, and David Sandall on harpsichord. David's wife, Kate Dunlay, researches the music, and occasionally step dances during performances. Stephanie Conn, vocalist and most recent member of the group, can be heard on Puirt-a-Baroque's third CD, *Return of the Wanderer*.

Puirt-a-Baroque plays a range of music from Scottish Baroque music to current Cape Breton fiddle repertoire. David Greenberg and Kate Dunlay have published a book of fiddle tunes heard in Cape Breton. They perform locally in Toronto, but they also perform in Cape Breton. They preface their pieces with information about the songs, the composers, the style in which they play, and the instruments. I heard them perform in Toronto on March 1, 1998, and in Judique, Cape Breton, on June 17.

After attending one of their concerts, I was introduced to the members of the group by a York professor, Shelly Romalis, who knows them well. Stephanie was

immediately enthusiastic about my research and receptive to the idea of an interview. Stephanie seemed to be a logical consultant choice since she performs puirt-a-beul and she is a Gaelic learner as well as a professional singer who has spent some time in Cape Breton. It turned out that she was also well-educated in Western art music. She did her Masters in music at the University of Toronto, and is very conscious of historical musicology, and musical style.

Stephanie was interviewed in her downtown Toronto apartment on March 24. She had prepared what she wanted to say and did not need me to prompt her with many questions. Stephanie structured our interview by going through her collection of puirt-a-beul recordings on CDs. After playing each one, she would critique the performance, which then led us to discuss various topics. I occasionally prompted our discussion by asking a question or raising an issue but generally the interview flowed of its own accord for an hour and a half. While we might have gone on, Stephanie requested that we conclude then as she had a performance that evening and she wished to have time to prepare.

Stephanie met David through the Toronto Baroque ensemble, Tafelmusik, in which David is a violinist and Stephanie is a choir member. She had had some previous exposure to Gaelic song and admired David's Cape Breton tunes when he played in the hallways during breaks in Tafelmusik's rehearsals. Stephanie told me that she was quick to indicate interest when she heard that David was searching for a singer for Puirt-a-Baroque:

I talked to him about how, on my own, I was trying to learn [Gaelic] with a couple of books. I was trying to learn Gaelic and memorize songs from CDs, looking at the words so I could learn how to pronounce them. And then I had vowed to go [the Cape Breton Gaelic College] that summer after I finished working. I would celebrate by going back to school in Cape Breton. ... I fudged a bit initially how much Gaelic I knew. And then I just crammed. I just went out and bought, with my last wages, piles of fiddle discs and things. It's been a sort of accelerated course.

While at the Gaelic College in Cape Breton, Stephanie also began learning step-dancing, which she also performs with Puir-t-a-Baroque.

During the interview, Stephanie described her family background. She told me that her mother is Scottish and her father, Irish. From a young age, she was involved in Scottish country dancing lessons and her father taught her Irish songs. But Stephanie felt that something was missing:

I participated in [Scottish and Irish culture] but I always felt something a little—something didn't resonate with me with the bar songs of Ireland. That was fun but it wasn't quite right. And Scottish music seems to be all this smoothed out [stuff]—Scottish country dancing—all sort of gentrified or something. I was thinking, “where's the soul of it?” You know, *Oh Flower of Scotland* doesn't cut it for me. It's like, they're not old and I would say to my father, “what's an *old* song?” But he didn't really know a lot of old songs. Maybe to the 19th century but certainly not before. When I first heard Gaelic music—the first time I really went, “Gotta learn it!”—was at university through a friend of mine. She had a Celtic ensemble and I thought, “Oh, that'll be fun. I'll know these songs.” And when I arrived, she said, “well, we've only got five women and everyone's a singer or a wind player” so we learned puirt-a-beul and a few little dances. ... Then we'd split that up with waulking songs because she'd say, “well, it's an all-women's tradition in Scotland”. So it was kind of by accident that I found the Gaelic repertoire. But as soon as I did, it was like the missing link. And then when I went to Cape Breton, I thought, “OK, something here is the core of what I was missing in modern Irish and Scottish.”

Stephanie associates Gaelic culture with “old” and Anglo-Irish and Anglo-Scottish culture as “modern.” Without saying anything overt, she gave me the impression that

Gaelic culture is more legitimate or authentic than other forms of “Celtic” culture. For her, Gaelic song, at least in Cape Breton, has “soul,” or some essence lacking in Scottish country dancing or Anglo-Irish pub songs.

Stephanie began the interview by playing a set of puirt-a-beul sung by a native Gaelic speaker from Scotland. She really disliked this woman’s performance because her transitions between each puirt-a-beul were inconsistent and she used too many *ritards*. Still, Stephanie felt uncomfortable criticizing anyone on tape; hence, no names are used here. Stephanie added,

Since she comes from a native speaking background, you’d think you could look to her for some sort of traditional context or a style of some sort. And yet, it’s dance music, it’s meant for dance music, but she’s clearly not... It’s like Chopin waltzes. You know, you’re supposed to dance to them. She’s making them into some kind of show piece and they’re little ditties. It’s kind of interesting. And that brings up the whole issue of how, in Cape Breton, [puirt-a-beul] are thought of as the least of the songs. In Scotland, as you say, people really pride themselves if they can do it.

First, Stephanie looks to a native speaking Gaelic singer for a traditional rendition of Gaelic song. Stephanie resists this singer’s modern arrangements and stylistic renditions. It is as though Stephanie feels that native Gaelic speaking singers have a duty to preserve and transmit the “traditional” culture.

Second, Stephanie immediately defines puirt-a-beul as dance music. If a puirt-a-beul performance is not conducive to dance, it is not, for her, an appropriate performance of the piece. This particular performer had, in Stephanie’s opinion, chosen to make “show pieces” of her puirt-a-beul instead of performing them appropriately as dance music.

Finally, Stephanie recognizes the differing attitudes towards puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton and Scotland. She knows that while they are neglected in Cape Breton, Scottish puirt-a-beul singers are highly regarded.

Throughout the interview, Stephanie compared Gaelic song to her understanding of Western art music. Her comments were peppered with references to Italian musical terminology. In the above quote, she has compared puirt-a-beul to Chopin waltzes. It is clear that while Stephanie is well-versed in puirt-a-beul, she is still translating the Gaelic song experience “into English,” as it were, in terms with which she is already familiar.

Stephanie explained why puirt-a-beul might be respected in Scotland:

It is really hard to sing [puirt-a-beul] well, like a dance piece, because there’s nowhere to breathe, and the words are usually tongue twisters and hard to say. The challenge seems to be, in that case, to emphasize what I think the second important thing about it is. Which is how it’s the most obvious example of how the music and the Gaelic language, how those two aspects of the culture are inter-linked.

Stephanie believes that puirt-a-beul are impressive enough when performed “traditionally” because enunciation and breathing prove difficult to master. These performance aspects are difficult because of Gaelic song’s guiding principle: music and language are equal and each affects the other. In this respect, Stephanie’s perspective is similar to that of David.

The interconnection of music and Gaelic language has, however, posed some problems for Stephanie. She explained,

Then you have the big dilemma, which I’m coming up against all the time. Mary Jane comes at mouth music from the perspective of a Gaelic speaker or a learner, someone who is primarily interested in culture of which music is an aspect,

whereas I come at mouth music as a musician and a singer, a researcher, and I'm trying to bring out more the musical aspects—or that's how I started—and now the challenge is how can I make it true to the language and yet make it have the right musical feel?

Stephanie realizes that her agenda is different than some singers such as Mary Jane Lamond. She believes that Lamond's priority is to demonstrate how puirt-a-beul is one aspect of an entire culture whereas Stephanie's focus, as an outsider and a singer, is on the musical aspects of puirt-a-beul. Stephanie understands that in Gaelic culture, music does not take precedence over language and yet she is not from Gaelic culture so her interests and values are understandably sometimes different.

Asked what she felt were the special qualities needed to sing puirt-a-beul,

Stephanie returned to her focus on technical issues:

Breath control. Your diction has to be really good but not in an overdone way. ... You know, it's like step dancing. All the steps have to be precise and crisp but you can't be putting that much effort into it or else you just can't get fast enough and you just look awkward. I have to admit, I don't work terribly hard at it. That seems to come to me easier than other things. Once I can say the words and once you've got the feel of the fiddle tune, with the right style, it all seems to come together. But I think you almost have to be—oh, I won't say you have to be a more musical person, but sometimes I think you have to be more connected to the musical style to sing mouth music than you do to sing a song, a ballad, because a ballad is often unmetered anyway or, if you're singing a solo ballad, you can stop or take time where you need to. It's a bit more personal in a way. And, OK a milling song, it has a pretty relentless tempo but often the lines don't really scan anyway—they have too many syllables—and you have to be kind of *parlando* in your delivery. But with mouth music, all the rhythms and things—it's like being a big dance fiddler. If the rhythms aren't in the right place, it's harder to dance to. I think it's the same for mouth music. It's more of an instrument in a way.

Once again, Stephanie returns to issues of rhythm and pronunciation. But she also discusses style, and she suggests that her vocal style derives from her understanding of the fiddle tune associated with a given port-a-beul.

Intriguingly, Stephanie believes that puirt-a-beul require more musicality than other Gaelic song genres. Since puirt-a-beul are meant to accompany dance, the performer is constrained by the necessity of maintaining a quick tempo and rhythmic precision and consistency. Stephanie suggests that these constraints require greater musicality, since it is presumably more difficult to be musical when the performer is restricted by certain requirements. Stephanie does not feel that other Gaelic song types are not limited in the same way.

Stephanie to expanded on her differentiation between puirt-a-beul and milling songs:

The thing about milling songs is that they're often really wonderful poems on their own or they often tell stories which give you an insight into the culture, how it used to be. It's a way to learn... It's one of the ways I work on my Gaelic speaking, is to take a milling song and take apart the sentences and see how they've contracted things and the colloquial—I think that's the kind of role that it's playing, as you said, in Cape Breton [and] as a community event too.

Stephanie sees the milling song in two ways: 1) as a means of learning the Gaelic language, a pedagogical tool and 2) as a means of creating community. She feels that it is especially helpful for learning the language because the lyrics unfold to reveal a cohesive narrative. She also knows that people gather together to sing milling songs at a milling frolic in Cape Breton, and each person is given equal opportunity to sing solos.

She then compared the Cape Breton attitudes towards puirt-a-beul and milling songs:

It's almost like the difference between a really fun riddle and a Shakespeare sonnet. The riddles are very clever and it's hard to make a good one and it's admirable when they fit together well but it's not the same as a lofty, poetic work. But it has its own value of a different kind. Maybe the old people are worried that people will be drawn to the easy [to understand] thing and not learn the hard thing: read the comic books and not the Shakespeare.

Stephanie realizes that puirt-a-beul have their own value; earlier she discussed their technical sophistication. But she also sympathizes with Cape Breton Gaelic speakers' concerns. Stephanie considers the milling song repertoire to be more poetic than puirt-a-beul. Stephanie's metaphorical differentiation between puirt-a-beul and milling song repertoire is based on issues of language. The type of language used in a milling song is valued higher than that used in puirt-a-beul.

If Stephanie does indeed believe that the language used in puirt-a-beul is of relatively low value in Gaelic culture, it is not surprising that Stephanie would suggest that puirt-a-beul are valued more by fiddlers than singers:

I think maybe that's the reason why fiddlers place more emphasis on puirt-a-beul than Gaelic speakers do because it's the easy way or the useful way for them to make contact with the language and the old culture. That's how I see it. While the singers, while [puirt-a-beul] are fun and they break up a night of singing a lot of long, difficult songs—I can tell you too after learning my new song for the last concert that when you have to learn 32 lines of a poem, it's like “whew! [It's a relief that] it's a port-a-beul.” It's only got four lines or eight lines and it's fun and you can relax and do something musical and it's not like reciting Shakespeare, which is how I think of a lot of the old ballads.

For the fiddlers, puirt-a-beul facilitate performance because the words indicate how a fiddle tune should be played. In contrast, singers are always connected to the language

through their song repertoire and therefore they are free to use puirt-a-beul as a refreshing counterpoint to longer, more serious Gaelic songs or as a flamboyant concert encore.

With puirt-a-beul's minimal, repetitive lyrics, Stephanie can concentrate on details of her musical delivery. Because puirt-a-beul are not lyrically serious, she does not have to worry about how the words are expressed and can instead focus on how the tune is rendered.

Asked how she chooses her puirt-a-beul repertoire, Stephanie answered,

I try to sing songs [of] which I have a recording of a native speaker either singing or saying the words. But it's not always possible. Then I have to check with Hector [MacNeil, a Gaelic instructor in Cape Breton] or ... Lorrie [MacKinnon]. A non-Gaelic singer will be really strict about how they say the words— OK, I realize that I'm contradicting myself when I say that I never bend the words. But there are ways to fudge an emphasis even in singing English. You don't always say a word exactly the same way. There's ways to fudge it so it still sounds right but maybe has a bit more musical flair. ... You find a nice compromise, I suppose, between the two.

As a Gaelic learner, Stephanie is aware that, without a pronunciation model, she could unintentionally misrepresent the lyrics. While she accepts some musical guidance from people more familiar with Cape Breton Gaelic culture than she, she resists the strictures placed upon her by Gaelic learners who, in their eagerness to represent Gaelic language and culture accurately, might not understand that singing occasionally requires alterations to the language not necessarily allowed in spoken language. And yet apparently it was never suggested to Stephanie that Gaelic singers might alter pronunciation as necessary. She has made that assumption through her transposition of Western art music values onto Gaelic song.

Sometimes Stephanie learns repertoire suggested by David Greenberg or Kate

Dunlay:

They'll want me to sing something because they like the fiddle tune but maybe I just can't find anyone anywhere— I mean, you don't want to do something that Capercaillie or Mary Jane [have done]. Especially not Mary Jane, because she's in the same country. But I don't like to learn [puirt-a-beul] out of the book. Because then when there's ones that I *have* learned through oral transmission, when I see it in a book, it looks so stiff. It's just a representation. You couldn't learn it as it is. But that would be a case where, if you had a fiddler, and you had a Gaelic coach, you could find that compromise. You could say, "OK, this is the spirit of the fiddle tune and now these are how the words really go." But, you know, [the book will have] two square eighth notes but really it's sort of like a triplet: a quarter-eighth triplet.

Although Stephanie is dealing with traditional repertoire, presumably known and sung by many people, she prefers not to duplicate the repertoire of other recorded artists. This is likely due to marketing concerns. On the other hand, if Stephanie is to learn her songs aurally rather than from print, she may have little choice but to use the very recordings she does not want to duplicate. At the same time, a song source in print is acceptable if learned under the guidance of a musical and language coach. In other words, Stephanie considers Gaelic song notation incomplete. It does not provide an accurate enough transcription of proper performance. Of course, *any* visual representation of an oral performance will contain some inaccuracies; it is no different with Western art music notation. But Stephanie, who was trained in Western art music performance, can add appropriate details when singing Western art music, probably with little conscious thought. Meanwhile, she is only just beginning her training in Gaelic song and

consequently needs careful instruction in pronunciation, melodic ornamentation, and allowable rhythmic and scalar fluctuations.

She explained her understanding of musical styles using yet another comparison to Western art music:

When you hear modern orchestras playing baroque music, they tend to smooth out everything. [They'll say,] "it's a whole note so we're going to hold it for four beats" but maybe that's not the best effect. Just because you're holding doesn't mean that it stays the same. All those places that you emphasize the volume and bring out the character of something: the character of a phrase. It's not always regular. And I think it's the same in puirt-a-beul. The more you listen to good fiddlers who have the old style, the more you learn about that.

Stephanie identifies a subtlety in puirt-a-beul. Despite puirt-a-beul's strict rhythm, Stephanie believes that she has the means to make puirt-a-beul musical through volume, phrasing, and carefully placed emphases on words. These interpretative variations are missing in printed transcriptions:

Despite Stephanie's interest in the musical aspects of puirt-a-beul, she focuses on language when first learn them:

I think I have two sort of ways that I come at it. First of all, I try to make sure I have the speaking of the poem as authentically—conversation style or poetic reading style. First come the words and then I ask David Greenberg, who has the consummate Cape Breton fiddle style, how does the tune go when he plays the fiddle tune? And then we try and find a way to make them meet. ... But I would never distort the word to fit the emphasis or the stress of the tune. But you find that often if you make a tiny change in the tune, the fiddle tune, that the words don't need to be distorted.

Stephanie only works on the tune after she has learned the lyrics. It is also significant that she learns the tune from a fiddler rather than from a singer. Presumably, Stephanie believes that puirt-a-beul tunes are better preserved in their instrumental form and, of

course, David is the most immediately available musician. However, Stephanie must also believe that these songs and/or tunes have sometimes been corrupted since she has no problem with altering the lyrics or the fiddle tune so that the two will fit. This musical compromise acts to speculatively reconstruct the historical performance practice of a particular tune. Stephanie does not privilege either the lyrics or the tune over the other, although she does ensure that the words are always comprehensible.

When learning puirt-a-beul, Stephanie also tries to emulate the fiddle as closely as possible:

If you can sing [puirt-a-beul] as though you were a fiddle, then it's just as danceable as fiddle music. All those emphasized notes, which hopefully work naturally with the words, they're just like the places where you want to put stops in and maybe it brings out... It's not just that it's rhythmic and regular but it brings out the syncopation and the offbeats and things and that's what makes it interesting. And the rhythms come in irregular places and not always on 1 and 3.

For Stephanie, the rhythm inherent in the words works with the rhythm of the port-a-beul. While puirt-a-beul may be metrically regular, internal rhythm may be quite sophisticated. Stephanie hopes to bring these aspects to the forefront in her singing. She is conscious of the fact that, as a singer of dance music, she is taking the place of an instrument: "With mouth music—all the rhythms and things—it's like being a big dance fiddler. If the rhythms aren't in the right place, it's harder to dance to. I think it's the same for mouth music. It's more of an instrument in a way." Stephanie had already mentioned that she tends to concentrate on the musical delivery of puirt-a-beul rather than on language. This may be explained by Stephanie's belief that she is taking the place of an instrument when

singing puirt-a-beul. The lyrics presumably exist to guide the musical delivery rather than because they have some poetic significance of their own.

Asked if her performance of puirt-a-beul altered after she learned to step dance, Stephanie affirmed that it did:

Yes, I think I became more attuned— Well, when I was dancing, when I started dancing, of course I learned more about the fiddle style. I became more interested in it. Yeah, I think it's definitely changed. I think it's the emphases again. The places where you emphasize or put more weight on the words when you can. And often they are designed so that the long syllables are in that right place. That's what seems to make the whole difference.

As Stephanie first learns a port-a-beul, she focuses on the lyrics: their pronunciation and stresses. She then concentrates on the tune, emulating the fiddle as closely as possible. And now she is further influenced by the interplay of the step dancing rhythm with the rhythm of the words and tune. Once again, Stephanie emphasizes how the lyrics play a rhythmic role in puirt-a-beul; they are more important for their musical contribution to the port-a-beul than for their actual meaning.

Stephanie also talked about why she feels that puirt-a-beul are more suited to step dancing than Scottish country dancing: "I think it's more a step-dancing thing but that's because the way I like puirt-a-beul to be is really full of character and I think it's the kind of thing that would inspire you to dance to." She did not, however, rule out the possibility that puirt-a-beul once accompanied Scottish country dancing: "I can't imagine Scottish country dancing to mouth music but I bet they do it somewhere."

Although Stephanie had been taught Scottish country dancing from the time she was young, she turned to Cape Breton step dancing. She explained why:

I had really wanted to for a long time, partly because ... Scottish country dancing is so unsatisfying from a musical point of view. Once I was getting serious about Gaelic singing and language, it seemed natural. Also, I have to admit, I was thinking partly from a performance point of view: what I can bring to an ensemble. I think, "I'm a singer and I'm a dancer too." The dance is also percussion. And also, when you're watching a night of people playing fiddles, I was always dying for someone to dance. I was always very disappointed if nobody did. 'Cause you want to [dance] and if you're not a dancer, you wouldn't know what to do anyway and you can vicariously experience the motion through someone else. And people love watching dance! Then the sound is such an important part of it too. Because they don't have any percussion.

Musically, Stephanie felt that step dancing would be valuable to Puirt-a-Baroque because it offers a percussive counterpoint to the music not otherwise present. Here again Stephanie emphasizes the musical qualities of puirt-a-beul over the lyrics. Step dancing also adds a visual dimension to Puirt-a-Baroque's performances. Stephanie thinks not only in musical, but also in practical, terms. Her dancing makes Puirt-a-Baroque both more marketable and more valuable to the ensemble.

Stephanie explained how she learns her steps:

I'm just starting to be able to pick up steps from seeing someone dance them. You keep replaying the video in your mind, "what'd he do? what'd he do?" Actually, I think sometimes you actually end up not doing it like they did but then that's part of the tradition anyway: "It's my version of the step." "That's not how the step goes! It goes like this." "Oh well. This is the way I do it now." It becomes your own version.

Stephanie here recognizes that the transmission process leads to change and that this is part of what defines the step dancing tradition. For Stephanie, there is no fixed canon of appropriate dance steps. Instead, there are widely-recognized steps which people learn and either consciously or unconsciously change somewhat, creating individual style. Stephanie seems to feel similarly about singing as she had talked about altering the

pronunciation of Gaelic lyrics slightly and altering the rhythm to fit with the fiddle tune. However, Stephanie seemed less certain of her right to alter a song since she talked about how other Gaelic learners insist upon proper pronunciation above all else.

Stephanie believes that there has always been a connection between puirt-a-beul and dance. She described her understanding of puirt-a-beul's origins:

They didn't always have instruments and if they didn't, then the singer could be the fiddle. From a practical point of view, it works fine. It's just that now, we always have the choice. I don't know why you would choose [puirt-a-beul] except to be different.

Obviously, puirt-a-beul are still being sung although Stephanie realizes that it is now rarely necessary for a singer to accompany dancing since there is no shortage of instrumentalists in either Cape Breton or Scotland. Stephanie acknowledges that the purpose of puirt-a-beul has changed, and suggests that it is now sung in order for the singer to provide a unique and varied program.

Stephanie suggested why puirt-a-beul are popular with audiences:

People like things that are fast and loud and high. Like a trumpet player: all he needs to do is do a scale and hold the high note and people go crazy. Or violinists: they're dropping notes everywhere but people go nuts. Sometimes it sounds harder than it is and sometimes it sounds as hard as it is and people think, "Wow! How can you get all those words out?" And then, maybe because it's in a foreign tongue, people who aren't Gaelic speakers are even more wowed by the mystery of it.

Even though Cape Bretoners may not like puirt-a-beul much, many others do. Audiences are impressed by technical prowess. On a technical level, Stephanie believes that puirt-a-beul are as difficult as any other Gaelic song genre because of breathing and pronunciation difficulties. At the same time, she thinks that audiences sometimes give

more credit than is deserved for technical facility. She also touches on audience romanticisation: Gaelic song is Other and therefore exotic and exciting.

While Stephanie believes that puirt-a-beul evolved out of the desire to accompany dance when faced with a lack of a musician, she was uncertain of when this situation might have occurred:

I don't know. It's like a legend. You don't know what to believe. It's a chicken and egg problem. It's hard to say because I think that a lot of the songs that we know are—the [tunes by] Dow and Gow and Marshall ...—a lot of tunes we know come from the 18th century so that's only as far back as we're going. I mean, in many cases. So if you're talking about those tunes, the classics of Scottish fiddling and Cape Breton fiddling, coming from the 18th century and really composed by these men, then obviously the tune came first. If they really did make the tunes, then the tune really did come first and then someone put words to it [and] well why not? They were doing that all the time in the classical music world in the 18th century. There's lots of tunes: in *The Beggar's Opera* there's tunes by Geminiani and Purcell and Handel that existed as instrumental pieces first and they put [words] to them because the tune was a hit already and, if the tune's a hit already, why not have words to it and then you can sing it as a showpiece? ... You've got to wonder about those stories about pipes and fiddles being banned. Does that mean that they had these tunes already and so they wrote words to them to remember or were there words already with them for the same reason as they were in the 18th century? ... Often, there's so many different sets of words that go with the tune, it leads me to believe that this tune was popular and various people at various times made words to go with it so they could sing it either because they didn't have a fiddle or because it was just fun.

Based on precedents in eighteenth century Western art music, Stephanie suggests that tunes were composed first and words were later added. Even as Stephanie notes that puirt-a-beul must be sung today as showpieces since they no longer serve the practical purpose of accompanying dance, she indicates that they actually originated for this purpose. Because several puirt-a-beul tunes have multiple sets of lyrics, Stephanie reasons that the tune was composed first and then words were set to them.

She also poses a pair of very good questions. Were puirt-a-beul lyrics only composed after the supposed banning of instruments in the 18th and 19th centuries in order to preserve instrumental tunes? Or were lyrics composed earlier, only becoming widely recognized when instruments were no longer at the forefront of the culture? In this respect, Stephanie echoes David's unwillingness to attribute puirt-a-beul to any one factor.

Stephanie went further, connecting puirt-a-beul with pipe tunes and their transmission:

A lot of fiddle tunes, though, were pipe tunes first, like *Calum Crubach* ["Lame Malcolm"]. That's the first one I think of. You're right in that case. It is older and pibroch, I think, is spoken before it's played: spoken and sung before it's played. So, in that case, they could've said, "this is a really hard tune" so they write the words so that you can learn the tune. But then the question is why do they write real words and not use the pibroch syllables they have. Because it was easier to remember than "he ho hi ho" or whatever they do for pibroch?

Stephanie's "pibroch syllables" are generally known as *canntaireachd*. Rhoda MacRitchie also connected puirt-a-beul and *canntaireachd*, although *canntaireachd* consists solely of vocables. Stephanie proposes that puirt-a-beul lyrics might have been written as mnemonic aids for pipers; actual words may be easier to recall than the vocables of the *canntaireachd* system. Furthermore, Stephanie believes that pipe tunes were first transmitted vocally, by means of either *canntaireachd* syllables or puirt-a-beul lyrics. The piper would learn to play the tune from its vocalization. In this instance, Stephanie suggests that lyrics precede the tune rather than the other way around. However, this does not negate her earlier belief that the lyrics may have been composed

after the tune; she only suggests that the lyrics may precede the tune when it is being taught and learned.

After the discussion of whether words or tunes were composed first, Stephanie considered how the origins of *puirt-a-beul* impacted on their performance:

If the tune came first and the words were either to help you learn or remember or just to perform a tune that you know as an instrumental piece, then of course you'd be aspiring to sound like a bagpipe or fiddle. Because that's what you're trying to evoke. I've even said it myself. Even though I try and put the words first all the time, I'm also informed by the Gaelic fiddle sound, style. ... I'm really conflicted with [one Scottish woman's] performances because she sings in such a way that it's almost not a word anymore. I know what she's doing in a way because I've done it myself. She's loving so much the feel in her mouth of the Gaelic words so she's hanging on to a consonant and it's really style. It's a brilliant performance but it's at the point where it's almost not words anymore. ... It's like *Pierrot Lunaire*, the Gaelic version. Gaelic *sprechstimme*! ... She's married to a piper. I know that's what she's doing. She's trying to sound—and she does! She sounds—she sounds like a bagpipe. And then I think, “what's it about though?” Maybe both versions are valid. Maybe in certain contexts. Maybe if you *are* singing for dancing then the most important thing at a dance would be rhythm and be danceable. And if you're singing in a concert, people are sitting listening, then they'll want to hear what the words are and maybe you'll amend your performance. I mean, there's no definitive performance of anything so maybe there's no definitive style of performance either.

Stephanie perceptively highlights why *puirt-a-beul* performance may have changed recently: since *puirt-a-beul* are no longer necessary to accompany dance, audience focus has shifted from the music to the lyrics. Since Stephanie herself likes to emphasize the musical qualities of *puirt-a-beul*, and since she associates *puirt-a-beul* with fiddle and pipe tunes, she likes the idea of being free to make the music sound like an instrumental tune. And yet she feels a responsibility for she knows that lyric clarity is an important value in Cape Breton Gaelic song performance: “Even when I pick milling songs that I

want to learn, often I'm frowned upon for choosing them for the melody, not for the words. Naturally, as a non-fluent [Gaelic] speaker by any means, that's what I notice and as a musician, that's what I hear first."

Although Stephanie suggests that both performance styles may be valid, she is unable to make the statement without some ambivalence. She explained why:

It's the whole insider/outsider thing. You come at it from a totally different set of values. It's even between Scotland and Cape Breton. ... There's a whole different emphasis on the songs that are prized and preserved in Cape Breton are completely different than the ones in Scotland. It's just kind of interesting why. ... The first clue, I think, which is as far as I've gone in a concrete sense, is what we were talking about before: how Gaelic singing in Cape Breton is primarily a community, a non-competitive community social event and is built around the milling frolic. The Gaelic tradition in Scotland, I think, is preserved through the Mòd. So there's an emphasis on solo performance as opposed to group performance and on perfection. ... So, I mean, a lot of songs, milling songs, a lot of them don't make great solo performances because it's kind of boring to hear four lines of a melody 20 times or more.

Not only is Stephanie aware that she is a Gaelic cultural outsider, but she also recognizes that there are different types of Gaelic insiders, namely those of Cape Breton and those of Scotland. Each has different cultural values that affect song repertoire and performance styles. Ironically, Stephanie feels constrained at Cape Breton milling frolics, which supposedly encourage communal singing and provide more space for individual style than a competitive Mòd.

Aware that she is an outsider, Stephanie is hesitant to perform at Cape Breton milling frolics. Yet she feels conflicted, wondering why she should not perform if she wants to and if the Cape Breton participants ask her to:

Everyone at the milling frolic is asking me, last year, to sing (people that knew me, that heard me sing at the College or whatever). “Oh, Stephanie’s a good singer.” “*Tha Stefag math gu seinn.*” “Come on! *Gabh oran!*” And I was like, “no, I don’t really think I should.” And then [someone says], “that’s good. You really shouldn’t be singing it.” And I’m thinking, “well, why not? They wanted me to! And I’m a learner and they’re going to take it in context.” And she’s like, “it’s good to hear the old guys.” And it is true. It is good to hear the old guys sing. But if the younger generation doesn’t start doing the singing and being maybe corrected or encouraged then who’s going to be doing it in even five years? That’s something that I find is a real controversy about that. It’s very conflicted.

Stephanie sees the milling frolic as an opportunity to learn how to sing a milling song directly from native speakers’ corrections. Perhaps she also considers the milling frolic as an opportunity to become part of the community. She has worked hard to learn Gaelic songs and would like to have the chance to both test and prove herself. At the same time, she is hesitant to force herself onto the culture and she recognizes that she can still learn through observation. Stephanie has also self-consciously imposed restrictions on herself. It is clear that the members of the community would be happy to hear her sing. But she is aware of her outsider, formally-trained status and she refuses to sing, even though she would like to.

Puirt-a-Baroque faced a similar issue when performing in Cape Breton:

There are people [in Cape Breton] who really hate David Greenberg because “he’s not from here and he’s making his living from our music and we gave it to him. And now he’s making money with it.” And I’m thinking, “well, it wasn’t yours to give and he’s not exploiting you. In fact, maybe because people in the west are hearing David play, maybe they’ll be more interested in going to Cape Breton and hearing everybody else that’s there.” It’s more like free advertising, I think.

Stephanie here flags issues of ownership: who owns Cape Breton Gaelic song, who has the right to sing it, and who has the right to teach it? Stephanie justifies Puirt-a-

Baroque's use of Cape Breton Gaelic music by suggesting that a) their performance of it is ultimately beneficial to Cape Breton, through the education of others about the region and its culture, and perhaps bringing tourist dollars, prestige, and potential learners to Cape Breton and b) the music is free for anyone to perform (in appropriate venues and in an appropriate idiom). Clearly, Stephanie respects the Cape Breton Gaelic tradition and therefore it would be virtually impossible for her to believe that she was misappropriating it. If she believed that, she would not be performing with Puirt-a-Baroque.

Stephanie explained how she draws the line between respectful use of the tradition and misappropriation:

What's exploitation and what's appropriation? It's so hard [to draw the line]. I think it's wrong to take something and distort it in a way that isn't true to its roots. So, I wouldn't want to take a port-a-beul or a milling song and—really, it's not morally wrong to harmonize it in a way that doesn't reflect what you kind of hear or feel when you hear it a cappella. That's just your personal harmonization. You can't really argue with that. But I wouldn't want to take a song and distort the words so you couldn't understand them or, if it's certain songs that are very sentimental or sacred, I wouldn't want to sing them in a way that's disrespectful. Or I'd want to sound like I'm in tune with what other people are doing or in tune with the tradition. It's not wrong but it's a drag when people try to sing a French song and they have a terrible accent. Most people can really tell that, for example. Maybe because it's a minority culture, people are a bit more defensive and feel they have to defend it more because there's less people who know when it's wrong. What's the point of disseminating it wrongly? ... But if I'm singing a song that's from Cape Breton because I really like the song and I want people to hear it and I'm presenting it in a way which is “hey, look how it's linked to things even older!” if it's part of the continuum, I would hope that people wouldn't be offended by that. I'm not taking it away. Even if I did something that Mary Jane was doing, I wouldn't think it would in any way be-- I don't see how it would damage what she's done already. It wouldn't be a slight to her work. I don't understand but I think it's all to do with a minority culture or a dying language. People are a little easier with things that are living. If someone speaks English with a broken accent, you think, “isn't that cute?” Like, I love it when French people speak with their little, quaint misuses of the language. But maybe if

almost no one could speak English properly you'd be really correcting them because someone's got to learn to speak it right.

Stephanie's line between respectful use of the tradition and wrongful misappropriation centres on language. It is acceptable to add harmonies to songs, as long as the words are sung correctly and they are understandable. But words sung with a non-Gaelic accent would be disrespectful. Stephanie reasons that because Gaelic is a minority language threatened with extinction in Cape Breton, Gaels are justifiably concerned with its delivery.

Since Gaelic songs do not belong to anyone in particular and are free for anyone to use (respectfully), Stephanie believes that it is acceptable for Puirt-a-Baroque to record songs that have been released on other Gaelic performers' recordings. The inherent suggestion is that each performer's unique interpretation and style would prevent any concern over repeated repertoire. At the same time, Stephanie is hesitant; she may be concerned with the issues of ownership she spoke about earlier. Perhaps she feels that Mary Jane Lamond has staked a territory out for herself by recording particular songs or perhaps Stephanie feels that Mary Jane Lamond has more inherent right to the cultural repertoire than she herself does.

Stephanie told me that she enjoys "Celtic pop," or music that goes beyond a strictly traditional performance. She had difficulty defining the difference between alterations made within the tradition and those that changed the tradition or made it untraditional. She described how one person judged some music untraditional while, for

Stephanie, “it was traditional. Maybe they played the tune a little differently but that’s part of the tradition: to bring your own perspective on the piece.”

And that is where we left the interview. Stephanie, as the singer for Puirt-a-Baroque, is part of an evolving tradition and she recognizes it as such. At the same time, she wishes to be respectful of Gaelic music’s traditions and roots. She struggles to find a balance between musicality and language, freedom and rules. And while she may never be able to define the lines between these categories, she has clearly taken the time to explore them.

4.4 Conclusions

My first six interviews had been conducted over a period of three months ending in March. Afterwards, my time was spent with preparations for my Cape Breton fieldwork that began in May. By the time I had interviewed Stephanie, however, I had exhausted all my Toronto resources.

Already in these few interviews, varying attitudes towards puirt-a-beul were expressed by consultants of diverse backgrounds, who held widely ranging notions of the origins, purpose, and value of puirt-a-beul. FW expressed a strong dislike of puirt-a-beul, whereas Rhoda loves them. David uses puirt-a-beul in the classroom in order to introduce students to the Gaelic language and culture and Stephanie performs puirt-a-beul professionally. Although all of my Toronto consultants associated puirt-a-beul with

dance, there were uncertainties regarding the type of dance puirt-a-beul should accompany.

These ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties occupied my mind en route to Cape Breton. Was FW, in fact, correct that native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers dislike puirt-a-beul? If so, would I be dismissed because of the nature of my research? Were my Toronto consultants' comments and feelings representative of what I would find in Cape Breton? How did my Toronto consultants' relationships to Cape Breton Gaelic culture affect their responses to my questions?

CHAPTER FIVE CAPE BRETON INTERVIEWS

Upon arriving in Cape Breton, I spent a week traveling through the area. It did not take long to find Gaelic cultural events and to make some valuable contacts. Cape Breton Tourism provided me with information regarding a Gaelic language workshop (which I attended my first day), Cape Breton square dances, and other Celtic events. These allowed me to get some insight into the culture and people.

Towards the end of my first week, I stayed at the Highland Village Inn in Iona, where the proprietess, Sheila MacNeil, overheard me discussing my research on the phone. She mentioned that the hotel was bringing in some native Gaelic speakers to give a milling frolic demonstration for the hotel guests. She invited me along. When Bruce, Sheila's husband, introduced me and my research to the five singers, I was immediately asked to join them at the table. Although I did not know any songs, I was able to fake most of the choruses. Of those five men, I eventually interviewed four (two of those interviews are detailed below). Bruce also suggested that I might like to attend the Celtic Colours press conference to be held early the following week.

Early in my second week, I conducted my first interview with Rosemary McCormack, of B&R Heritage Enterprises in Iona. Rosemary is heavily involved in the Cape Breton Gaelic community. She runs Gaelic language and song workshops, she teaches in the schools, and her company – which she owns with her husband – produces CDs of Cape Breton Gaelic song and music. She invited me to attend the 50th ordination

anniversary for Father Morley, Iona's priest, where I again encountered some of the same men from the earlier milling frolic; they, in turn, introduced me to other Gaelic speakers. The event featured Gaelic songs, fiddling, and step dancing.

Shortly thereafter, I moved in with Roddie C. and Helen MacNeil in Barra Glen. The next six weeks were spent attending various events and scheduling interviews. It was not always easy to arrange an interview. Cape Breton is very busy in the summer. Musicians are regularly hired to perform and/or sing at ceilidhs, dances, festivals, and milling frolics. Furthermore, many family members return to Cape Breton for their summer holidays and people did not want to take time away from their families for an interview. Finally, Cape Breton has always been the focus of someone's attention: the BBC regularly film Cape Breton Gaelic culture and collectors have always been interested in Gaelic songs and fiddle tunes. While most people were very obliging when approached for an interview, I could understand why some people did not go out of their way to accommodate me.

However, it helped that I was living with Rod, as he is well known in the community. He introduced me to other Gaelic speakers and singers and Helen arranged several interviews for me. Several people were surprised that I was studying puirt-a-beul rather than other types of Gaelic song but no one dismissed my research. And while a number of consultants echoed FW's dislike of puirt-a-beul, an equal number of my Cape Breton consultants enjoy puirt-a-beul, performing or teaching them regularly.

5.1 Malcolm (Maxie) MacNeil

Maxie was one of the men I had met at my first milling frolic. It turned out that Maxie attended most local milling frolics if he could, so I saw him repeatedly over the summer. He has also appeared in several documentaries on the area and he even had a cameo appearance in the Hollywood film, *Margaret's Museum*.

Maxie is easily recognizable for his strong features. His dark hair belies his age, which must be early 70s. His singing voice is powerful and carries easily without a microphone. Compared to many Gaelic singers, he sings with gusto and has a fairly broad Gaelic song repertoire. He lives near Rod's farm and he was happy to allow me to interview him. As a native Gaelic singer, he is likely no stranger to interviews. His personality was as strong as his appearance, he had definite, strong opinions about puirt-a-beul, and he peppered his answers to my questions with colourful expressions.

Maxie immediately let me know how he felt about puirt-a-beul:

I'm not really that fussy on it [puirt-a-beul]. I'll tell you an instance now where we went up to the Ontario Mòd in '84 and there was a song that was sung here but it was composed down in Boisdale there. And when most of the fellas around here got a hold of it, they kind of beefed it up a little bit, you know. A few drinks and they like to get it going a little faster ... My father had it and when he'd be singing it at a party, a couple of the young fellas picked it up and they stepped it up, you know. So I sang it [too]. ...I wasn't going to enter this evening—in the evening there's a free-for-all there where you go in and throw in [any song]. [But] I sang this song. So anyway, [the judge] came to me afterwards and she said, "Well, you'd have no problem winning this only that's a port-a-beul." I said, "That's not a port-a-beul! That's a song! I know the people who composed it and it's got words. The only thing is that it's been beefed up and if you want to dance with it," I says, "go ahead and dance! But it's not puirt-a-beul. It's a song!"

Maxie differentiates between puirt-a-beul and “songs.” He does not categorize puirt-a-beul as a song genre and neither, apparently, did the judge. This coupled with his declaration that he is not fussy on puirt-a-beul suggest that puirt-a-beul are negligible and unimportant. The fact that Maxie’s song was of known origin seems, in his mind, to have ruled it out of the puirt-a-beul genre. In other words, puirt-a-beul must be old enough to be of unknown origin. Maxie may also believe the puirt-a-beul genre to be a fixed canon. A recently composed song, such as the one he sang, could not be considered a port-a-beul since the song is not part of the historically accepted puirt-a-beul repertoire. Additionally, Maxie identifies songs based on their lyric content. While puirt-a-beul do have words, their lyrics are perhaps not as noteworthy as the lyrics of other Gaelic song types. Meanwhile, the Scottish judge believed she had heard an example of puirt-a-beul based on aural cues since she would not have recognized it, suggesting that she identified certain characteristics as consistent with the puirt-a-beul genre.

When asked to define puirt-a-beul, Maxie started his explanation by singing a few examples and continued:

Then there’s some that repeat the line about six times. I don’t mind anybody learning it to get started, but for God’s sake, after you get started in Cape Breton here—did you meet ***** [anonymous woman]? She’s a good singer. Darn good singer. And she started on puirt-a-beul. And God she started and that’s all you could hear! She learned one really good song and she’d avoid the one, the one people were looking for until finally ... And she’s a good singer. Well, I notice now she’s learning a little more of the [other song genres]. Most of the people around here, the older age anyway, like the songs that was sang here. They want to get away from that stuff [puirt-a-beul]. Because they never heard it.

Maxie associates puirt-a-beul with repetition, which is clearly part of the reason he dislikes it. “Heavier” Gaelic song genres avoid repetition. He also sounded surprised that a good singer, such as the one he was referring to, would want to continue singing puirt-a-beul after her initial entry into the culture. Maxie associates puirt-a-beul with beginners, people who are not familiar enough with Gaelic culture to know what else is available. Finally, Maxie also says that older Gaelic singers may never have heard puirt-a-beul sung in Cape Breton during their youths, suggesting that puirt-a-beul were never a part of Gaelic culture in Cape Breton. However, while Maxie himself never learned to sing puirt-a-beul, he told me that he had heard others sing them: “No. I was never interested in it. I never had too much of it. There was only just a few little tunes that I remember them talking about them or heard somebody doing it.” So puirt-a-beul were familiar to people he knew. However, his family certainly did not teach it to him: “My father, I never heard him sing it. He had a lot of songs and I never heard him singing puirt-a-beul. Mother didn’t sing at all.”

Maxie also explained that puirt-a-beul *were* once a part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture: “[When] it was first used here, there was somebody going to dance and they had no [instrumental] music. And instead of just using the sounds, there was words put to it.” There is a difference between general cultural knowledge (i.e., puirt-a-beul have always been a part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture) and Maxie’s lived experience (i.e., puirt-a-beul were rarely heard). Alternatively, puirt-a-beul may have once been a part of Cape Breton

Gaelic culture but, by the time of Maxie's youth, people had dropped puirt-a-beul from their song repertoires.

If puirt-a-beul had once been a part of the Cape Breton Gaelic song repertoire, why had they disappeared from native speakers' repertoires? Maxie explained, "Well, I'd say myself it's because there's so damn many violin players. They seemed to have learned it just amazing, the way they picked [up] the violin, whether they had it coming over [to Cape Breton from Scotland] or what." Because puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dancing in the absence of instruments, the growing popularity of the violin meant there was a reduced need for puirt-a-beul. Maxie also later mentioned that Gaelic-speaking people of his generation "are looking for songs with a story in it." Puirt-a-beul rarely tell a story and even when they do, they are cursory. Maxie likes "something to be told: it's a drowning or it's a happy occasion." Puirt-a-beul are simply not lyrically interesting to Maxie.

Asked if puirt-a-beul would have accompanied square dances, Maxie said, "Oh I would say! Oh I would definitely say." At the same time, he recognized how difficult that would be:

I've seen where people were stuck some night and there was somebody good—it's long winded to [sing puirt-a-beul], you know. I would say where mostly it was used is somebody-- just a step dance is not too bad because a step dancer isn't going to dance that long ... Of course, there are different kinds of square dances.

He remembered a woman who used to accompany her step dancing with puirt-a-beul.

Step dancing requires a great deal of energy on the part of the dancer. The steps are quick and complex. The dancer improvises on the spot and generally does not repeat a step.

Therefore the dancer tires quickly and thus step dances tend to be relatively short, whereas each square dance consists of three long figures. Since puirt-a-beul also require significant breath and technical control, it is not surprising that they would be associated with a shorter rather than a longer dance form. However, it is entirely possible – if difficult – for someone to accompany a square dance with puirt-a-beul. In fact, Maxie recalled someone who used to sing square dance accompaniment but “I wouldn’t call it real puirt-a-beul at all.” Perhaps the singer jiggged the tunes. Jigging, as an informal improvisation, does not require so much breath or technical control, nor does it tax the singer’s memory for lyrics.

Maxie grew up surrounded by Gaelic song. Asked about ceilidhs in his youth, he described those that were held in his home:

We had a lot of ceilidhs. It was a place where people came and sang. Not too much violin music, no. There was some violin players. This fellow over here, this Jim MacNeil I spoke about before, he’d be there just about every night. He was a postmaster. And, of course, he was over there after the mail. Somebody mentioned, “You might as well sing a song, Jim.” He wouldn’t need a drink or nothing. He would sing all night. So, I mean, there was a lot of singing. So holiday come down in Sydney and the industrial areas where there’d be some young fellows down from here, “Come on up to Iona! Want to hear some Gaelic songs!” They’d all come around, Saturday, Sunday ... Sometimes the house would be just full. And then of course, New Year’s—first it used to be just New Years and then it spread to Christmas and then Easter and then any weekend at all! That’s the way it turned out. But then, after the war, the people started going away. The work was getting scarce and people, I guess, the old people were dying off. It started to die out. You can’t get three people together today.

Maxie made a point of mentioning that a ceilidh was not defined by music; it was perfectly common to have a ceilidh with no music at all. However, the frequent song-

filled ceilidhs resulted in Maxie's song repertoire, as he was never formally taught any songs:

I learned [songs] from listening to them in the house. Yeah. And you'd have them wrong. You'd have one verse. And it wouldn't be the right words and that went on for years. Actually, it's only just since I came back [from living and working in Ontario] and started getting involved in singing around here at different concerts that I try and sing it within reason. Got the books. And I can't read [Gaelic] very well, but I can make a fair stab at it. But I try to keep the words right.

Because Gaelic was spurned in the school system, Maxie is typical of many native Gaels in his inability to read the language. However, there were those who were literate and they made ample use of Gaelic song collections, especially *An t-Oranaiche* ("The Songster"), a popular Gaelic songbook dating from the late nineteenth century. It did not include musical notation but instead was used as a reference to ensure that the lyrics to various songs were learned correctly and in their entirety:

The old fellow over here had a copy [of *An t-Oranaiche*] and if there was a certain song that they heard, they just knew exactly where it was. I've seen copies of this book, and it come to a song that you heard around here quite often, you'd see the thumb marks. Right down at the corner where they'd spend hours learning it. And then they remembered them much more so than we do today. Learning it by just listening is not as good. They'd know exactly which verse was there, there or there. Some of them with twenty, thirty verses.

Even though Maxie learned his songs orally, he accords higher value to a singer who is able to supplement oral transmission with print transmission. He is aware that oral transmission can lead to change due to a fallible memory, the change then gets passed on to other singers. Maxie esteems songs learned "correctly," based on their printed form.

Maxie was so intrigued by Gaelic song that he never bothered learning to dance:

We'd go to a dance and we'd just go outside and have a bottle and we'd start singing some songs and there'd be an old-timer there or something. Get him in the back porch and he'd be singing. Why, other young ones they'd dance every set that was danced. It was just like that.

But despite Maxie's clear love of the language, and Gaelic song in particular, he did not speak Gaelic to his children. His daughter, Susan, however, grown and living in Halifax, has recently taken a considerable interest in Gaelic song as well.

Recognizing his love and reverence for Gaelic song, I was curious how Maxie felt about the recent popularity of Cape Breton Celtic pop. Maxie did not leave me in suspense: "it's a type of music that I just can't stand." He went on to explain why he felt it had become popular:

Well, it's got a bit of a beat to it and that's what it's all about. Like the rock, you know. I mean, that's maybe why we like the milling frolic. We like the ones that's got a little bit of a [lift]. I don't like these dead things where, I mean, they tell a terrific story but if there's half a dozen old timers around that knew the language well and this and that and somebody sang one of those songs, sure. But as far as going to a place, especially if you're going to entertain anybody, they don't want to listen to that long, drawn-out stuff. Just like the world has been going for the Celtic: a little bit of a lift to it.

Puirt-a-beul, which are regularly included on Gaelic song recordings (cf. Chapter 6), offer an alternative to the "long, drawn-out stuff." They are short, humorous and flashy. Once again, Maxie realizes that cultural outsiders do not have the cultural competency needed to appreciate long, serious Gaelic songs. They may not even want to achieve cultural competency. They are only looking for music with a lift.

Maxie also recognizes that Cape Breton Celtic musicians often have different backgrounds, interests, and goals than he:

Well, [The Rankins] got good backgrounds, that's one thing. But I guess something like Ashley [MacIsaac] did there, they're in for a business and they sort of got to go with the flow, that's their thinking. And they're a bit younger than our class.

He does not believe that traditional music or song would sell in the same way that Celtic pop does. He also accepts that younger people may not have the same tastes as Maxie's own generation. Maxie did, however, agree with me that some of these performers may have generated an interest in Gaelic culture: "Oh, they have helped. There's no two words about it. Definitely. Maybe Ashley has done more harm personally to himself than he has to the—And Natalie [MacMaster] gets a certain standard there and she kind of doesn't go over the line too much." Maxie tempers his dislike of pop music based on the performers' backgrounds, their need to make a living, and how close they remain to "traditional" culture.

Even though Maxie suggested that cultural outsiders are searching for music with a lift, he also believes that Gaelic song with a "lift" has been popular amongst native Gaels as well:

Years ago, at a milling frolic, there was milling songs. We [now] sing any kind of song that you can keep time with. And most of the songs sang at a milling frolic today are four-line songs, they're heavy songs [i.e. not milling songs]. They're speeded up a little bit. But if you can keep time to whatever you're singing, good enough ... This MacKinnon fellow over here, he composed about one of the last Gaelic songs that was composed around here, I guess. [During] the last war, a chap from MacKinnon Harbour there got killed, his friend. And he composed a song for him. And it's a lament. You'd call it a lament, but I sing it and we sing it at the milling frolics ... No trouble to keep time with that. But that's the idea. But you talk to some of these people, we get in trouble: "That's not a milling song." Who cares whether it's a milling song or not? I don't. If you keep time with it and everybody likes it, good enough!

Maxie argues that almost any genre of Gaelic song can be sung at the milling table so long as it has a good beat to which the cloth can be pounded. One would think that puirt-a-beul, with its upbeat tempo, would be a natural song genre to include in a milling frolic. Even though Maxie appears flexible about what types of Gaelic song genres are sung, he remains firm in his dislike of puirt-a-beul. At no point did he indicate that puirt-a-beul ever were or ever should be included at the milling table.

Maxie remains actively involved in the promotion of Cape Breton Gaelic culture by participating at milling frolics, teaching songs at Gaelic workshops, and indeed by granting interviews. He does, however, continue to be concerned about the future of Gaelic in Cape Breton: “I just got my doubts. It’s slipping all the time. I got my doubts. The young ones like to learn a song. There’s no doubt, they see a bit of entertainment in it. But as far as just learning the language, there isn’t too many that takes it.” He worries that Gaelic language lessons tend to emphasize grammar too much, alienating potential learners. Although he would be happy to see Gaelic studies as part of the school curriculum, he is dubious of the possibility:

Well, good luck to them. They’re lucky to keep the English, let alone the Gaelic. It’s going to be tough ... Well, look at how tough the funding—look at the cut costing they done, as it was. They tried different ideas and different politicians tried. It may happen. I mean, let’s face it, anything is [possible]. But I got my doubts. Even the French, I mean, there’ve been battles down at Mira Road there a few years ago where they were trying to open a French Immersion school or something like that. They had a heck of a battle. And look at how powerful the French [are]—part of our country is French. We got a big settlement in Richmond County and up in Inverness: Cheticamp. All French. And they had a heck of a battle. No, I think it’s quite a struggle.

He also worries that learners feel pressure to speak correctly or not at all. He therefore believes that Gaelic language is best taught through the medium of song. He teaches Gaelic songs at *Fèis nan Òran* (“Songfest”) conducted annually in Iona by B&R Heritage Enterprises.

But however doubtful Maxie may feel about the future of Gaelic, he continues to be active in the culture and does what he can to promote it in Cape Breton. Through his public singing, teaching, and interviewing for people such as the BBC and myself, he attempts to keep Gaelic culture, as he knows it, alive a little while longer.

5.2 Beth MacNeil

I was first introduced to Beth at the Highland Village Inn ceilidh. Amongst the fiddlers and step dancers, Beth and her daughter sang Gaelic songs, including “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” a port-a-beul made popular by Mary Jane Lamond on her second album, *Suas E!* They sang it unaccompanied, but Jenna added her own harmony arrangement. Later, she and I took Gaelic lessons together in Christmas Island, a short drive from Iona, where Jeffrey MacDonald taught weekly summer lessons. We were both in the intermediate level but she certainly impressed me with her greater language knowledge. Although she is not a fluent speaker, she appeared to have little trouble following Jeffrey’s Gaelic commentary and conversation and she answered him reasonably well.

Beth is middle-aged, in her mid-40s. She is a petite woman, with short, dark hair. She was born in Sydney, Cape Breton and her paternal grandparents were Gaelic speakers. She is vivacious and outgoing, seemingly always comfortable in conversation. She is thus very suited to her summer position as a guide with the Highland Village in Iona. Here Beth she provides historic information for visiting tourists and school children while wearing period costume. The Highland Village is a collection of historic Nova Scotian buildings in the middle of Cape Breton.

Beth started learning Gaelic in 1984, when Jim Watson was hired by the Highland Village to “instruct the staff and the community in Gaelic language.” Beth’s paternal grandparents had spoken Gaelic but she herself had never been taught. Although Beth was not working for the Village at the time, she said:

I just used to come over and take this little Gaelic class. I had planned a trip to Scotland in ‘85 so kind of thought, “Gee this is a good chance to at least know how to greet somebody.” So in ‘85 I applied [to the Highland Village] and started working here. I’ve been here ever since although the class structure has gone by the wayside here in the last few years now.

Beth has taught beginner Gaelic classes herself. Unfortunately, her beginner classes generally ran at the same time as the intermediate level, which was taught by a fluent speaker. This conflict prevented Beth from pursuing her own Gaelic studies, so she was pleased with the opportunity to learn from Jeff last summer.

Asked when she started singing, Beth explained:

I always sang. I sang from the time I was in school and stuff like that. I was always singing somewhere in a choir or group or something. So now I’ve just changed my focus and stuff like that. I don’t sing in English anymore. I’m just in Gaelic.

After Jim Watson's Highland Village Gaelic classes had ceased, Beth remained involved in Gaelic through the Cape Breton Gaelic Choir, of which she is still a member. She also participates in Gaelic song demonstrations for visitors at the Highland Village. As Beth said, "When [the village administrators] want to do [Gaelic song] as a demonstration thing ... I'm a person who sings ... If you sing, then around here, guess what! You're the one doing it!" In addition to giving song demonstrations, Beth leads workshops, one of which I attended at the Christmas Island "Fèis an Eilein."

Some people had recommended interviewing Beth because she has a reputation for singing puirt-a-beul. Yet Beth's interests include more than puirt-a-beul. She explained:

I like to sing a variety [of genres]—like I say, depending on where you're at and depending on who the audience is. I like to do Cape Breton songs, songs that were written here, songs in praise of Cape Breton (I find them really truthful). Puirt-a-beul. Whatever appeals to me. If I hear something and I like it [then I'll learn it]. A lot of times, to learn it is the effort. There's so many songs out there and I really—sometimes I feel like, when I hear people learn a song off a tape, myself included in this, it's like, why should we learn something that's already been recorded? If only we could access so much more of the stuff that's never been put on commercial tape. It's dying. I mean I'm sure there's probably thousands and thousands of songs that were sung here in Cape Breton that none of us are ever going to hear again because they're gone with the people who had sung them.

Beth is interested in learning local songs though the resources available limit her. Often, she learns songs from commercial recordings but there are very few commercially released recordings of Cape Breton Gaelic songs. They represent only a small number of songs that are or have been in the active song repertoire.

Even though there are numerous non-commercial recordings of Gaelic songs, they are not always easily accessible. For example, while anyone is free to access the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project in Antigonish, approximately 70 km from the Canso Causeway, there are tight restrictions governing their duplication. Furthermore, commercially released recordings generally include a transcription of the lyrics in the liner notes whereas informal recordings are generally not transcribed, frustrating Gaelic learners who do not yet have the fluency to translate the lyrics themselves.

As a result, Beth generally learns puirt-a-beul from commercial recordings, on which “you can usually find one or two.” In addition to learning from Mary Jane Lamond’s recordings, Beth uses recordings by Scottish Gaelic performers such as Catherine-Ann MacPhee and Arthur Cormack. Many Scottish Gaelic singers are personally known to Cape Bretoners as a result of their visits to the island when conducting workshops and research.

Although it might seem contradictory that Beth should claim to prefer local songs and yet use Scottish recordings as sources for puirt-a-beul, she explains “I think the ones here probably are the same puirt-a-beul as what they have on the other side [of the Atlantic Ocean].” Beth’s understanding of puirt-a-beul is that they were brought to Cape Breton by early Scottish emigrants and therefore, with the exception of any new puirt-a-beul compositions, the Cape Breton and Scottish repertoires are similar. Indeed, puirt-a-beul such as “Am Muilean Dubh” and “Calum Crubach” are known in both locations. As

a result, Beth can learn puirt-a-beul from Scottish singers but still consider the repertoire local.

When learning a song, Beth explained that she uses

Different methods. It depends on where I'm at and exactly what I'm doing. Sometimes what I'll do is I'll dub it off a tape or something and I'll take a blank 60-minute tape and I'll fill the whole tape with just that one song—puirt-a-beul, whatever. And every chance I have, I'll just listen to that tape. And just keep repeating, repeating it, repeating it, until finally I can do it without the tape. So that's one way I do it. Sometimes I'll sit down and just write it out—kind of a repetitive thing too: just keep writing it out, writing it out, writing it out till it goes from the paper to the brain. Long road! That's a long trip some days! But usually it's by repetition of some sort or other. That's the only way that I kind of feel that I get them.

Because Beth does not read music, she prefers to learn the tune by ear but learn the lyrics from print, whether from the liner notes or from a transcription by Jim Watson, with whom she works. Although she said that she can learn many puirt-a-beul lyrics by ear, “there always seems to be that one or two words that you just can't seem to grasp, especially off of a tape.”

Asked whether she understands the Gaelic lyrics she sings, Beth acknowledged:

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Usually I kind of get the gist and if I don't, well then I can always go to the dictionary and start looking it up to translate it for myself. But I don't usually try to translate something word for word. I find that's just an awful effort. So if I can get the sense of what's going on or have someone else tell me what it is—Like if I'm here at the Highland Village, I have access to Seumas [Jim Watson]. I just have to say, “What's this about?” Or “Help me here, I'm stuck on these couple of words.”

For Beth, then, an overall sense of the song and music is what is important, rather than the exact meaning of the words. It would appear that Beth is drawn to Gaelic songs

generally—and puirt-a-beul specifically—based on their aural appeal, rather than their literary sense.

While Beth has learned a number of songs directly from Gaelic singers, she acknowledges that there are few native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers who sing or demonstrate an interest in puirt-a-beul:

[Puirt-a-beul has] gotten so sparse with the native speakers and that. And I think that probably the only way to keep the puirt-a-beul really going here is, like I say, what comes out of Scotland because I don't think you're going to find too much of it here unless you really had the time, energy and effort to really nail down—probably there's only, what? half a dozen people or more that would really, you'd be able to sit down with and get something out of.

Beth does not feel that she has access to many “live” sources in Cape Breton even though she feels that puirt-a-beul should be maintained in Cape Breton. This lack of Cape Breton resources further explains Beth’s frequent use of Scottish recordings to learn puirt-a-beul.

Asked why native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers seem to care so little for puirt-a-beul, Beth expressed uncertainty:

I think it was looked at—even when you sing a lot of the good ones, like a lot of them are kind of almost like nursery rhyme type things. As English-speaking adults, we don't go around singing "Mary Had a Little Lamb". There's all the little tunes and nursery rhyme things you learn as a child and when you get to be an adult, you certainly wouldn't get on stage and sing any one of them. People would really give you an odd look, I think, unless you were specifically there to entertain children. So I think that's what's happened with it here.

According to Beth, puirt-a-beul, as a song type meant for children, are not appropriate for adults to sing for an adult audience. But if this were true, why would puirt-a-beul continue to be popular in Scotland? Beth clarified:

It's probably just developed in a different way over there ... They had more venues too, to perform. You know, when you think of the Mòd, and stuff like that, which is something that never took place in Cape Breton. So maybe something like that, with all those good categories: puirt-a-beul was a category. That's probably why it was kept there and people hear it more and it's right there in front of you but in Cape Breton, it's been put aside. That's my thought on it anyway. I'm not saying any of it's right!

Beth believes that the National Mòd legitimizes puirt-a-beul in Scotland. Whether or not puirt-a-beul were once considered songs for children, they are now considered appropriate for adult singers in Scotland. The Mòd's legitimacy overrides any "childish" associations with puirt-a-beul. Due to the absence of any large-scale, influential mòds in Cape Breton, puirt-a-beul have not been legitimized in the same way there.

In view of her comment that the Mòd has the power to legitimize puirt-a-beul in Scotland, I asked Beth for her opinion on mòds in general:

You know, the thought of competition and the pointing and the marking—I don't know, I just don't think it's the way for here. People in Cape Breton aren't openly competitive about that. Not only Gaelic, I mean, because I've thought about this before and talked about it with different people with regard to the Mòd. It's like the fiddle tradition in Cape Breton. If you put 2 or 3 or 4 fiddlers in the room, they may in their own way try to outshine one another but you would never see an open kind of rivalry between the fiddlers to say, "Oh, I'm better than you and I'm better than you." I think it's just a mindset here ... I wouldn't want to see people getting discouraged by being told that they weren't the best. You have to be careful about how people react to things. Like I say, I think it's just a mindset thing here in Cape Breton. I don't think it would be successful. I know it's not. It's not successful here in Cape Breton.

Competition has its benefits. Participants learn new repertoire thoroughly and well.

Competitors are motivated to practise and to set high standards for themselves. The

Mòd's ability to legitimize Scottish Gaelic culture is important in view of the historical devaluation of Gaelic by non-Gaels. But Beth is concerned about the possible negative

impact that competition may have. She worries that the standards set by competition would discourage people from studying Gaelic, for fear of failing to meet a predetermined level of achievement. For Beth, the absence of formal competition in Cape Breton results in a stronger sense of community. A non-competitive community provides space for all types of people with varying levels of cultural competency.

However, if puirt-a-beul are in fact considered childish in Cape Breton, why would Beth perform them? She described her own interest as

Mostly a performance thing because people really enjoy to hear it. When you are performing, I think you have to, to some degree, please your audience. And in a lot of cases, an audience at a concert or particular venue may not be so pleased if you were singing more serious type songs. So if you throw in a port-a-beul or two, then the people—They like the rhythm, they like to be able to sit there and tap their feet to the song and actually see the rhythm of it.

Beth never specified who the “people” are who enjoy puirt-a-beul, whether they are non-Cape Bretoners, non-Gaelic speakers, or Gaelic learners. But the fact that Beth indicated that a concert audience might not appreciate “serious type” songs suggests that they are not native Gaelic speakers, since most native Gaelic speakers like Maxie tended to express a preference for “serious type” songs. Beth’s experience is that audiences differ depending on where a Gaelic song event takes place. She explained the difference:

It depends where you're at. It depends who your audience is. And I think, as a performer, you judge what you do by what your audience is at that time. If you're performing in a certain place and you know that it's—like at a milling frolic, where there's a whole table full of Gaelic speakers and people who, even if they don't really know the language, still love the songs and love the music, then that venue, they're there to really appreciate what you're doing. But sometimes, like if you're at an outdoor concert type thing, people are there to be entertained. And the puirt-a-beul is entertaining.

Beth implies that puirt-a-beul are more entertaining than other, “serious type” Gaelic songs because they are rhythmically catchy. Based on my observations, Cape Breton outdoor concerts generally feature instrumentalists (fiddlers and pipers) and step dancers rather than singers, probably because the former present no language barriers. A milling frolic, on the other hand, centres on Gaelic song. Puirt-a-beul were never performed at any of the milling frolics that I attended. Beth suggests that puirt-a-beul are particularly well-suited to an outdoor concert event, where the audience may not be interested in Gaelic song at all, because puirt-a-beul are accessible at the musical as well as the language levels. It is not necessary to understand Gaelic to appreciate puirt-a-beul.

Because Beth noted that puirt-a-beul are not particularly popular amongst native speakers and because she described them as entertaining for what she implied were largely non-Gaelic speaking audiences, I wondered if she had had any reaction to her performances of puirt-a-beul by native speakers. She replied:

I wouldn't say I've had any real reaction. Other than—I think they enjoy it too. And I think maybe now some of them kind of enjoy to see it going on because it brings them back to their childhoods, some of the older ones. I think it's like, all of a sudden, “Wow! I haven't thought of that in 50 years!” So I think that's—they like it.

If puirt-a-beul were once sung for children in Cape Breton, then it follows that adults might enjoy reminiscing about those same songs from their past. In this case, puirt-a-beul are appreciated for their nostalgia but are still generally considered inappropriate for adults.

Although Beth performs puirt-a-beul publicly, she notes that Cape Breton puirt-a-beul were not always formally performed. She associates puirt-a-beul with women and the home, rather than social gatherings, ceilidhs, and other more public performances:

Here in Cape Breton, it doesn't seem that puirt-a-beul is ever something that people performed. It wasn't a performance thing, it wasn't considered—if you were at a ceilidh type thing—that you would stand up and sing puirt-a-beul as adults. It doesn't seem to have had its place. Alan MacLeod said his mother sang puirt-a-beul; he also told this to Mary Jane. So it seems like in Cape Breton, what kept puirt-a-beul alive basically would've been mothers with their children, maybe even grandmothers with children, in the house, the little ditties. Maybe they were just carrying on a little bit and step dancing around the kitchen.

In this scenario, puirt-a-beul are not only sung to keep children entertained, but actually to accompany their children's efforts to learn step dancing. The Cape Breton fiddle tradition has historically been male-dominated (cf Doherty 1996:115). Women might not have had access to instruments. But they could sing dance tunes. In fact, Beth defines puirt-a-beul as “the ability to sing fiddle and pipe tunes.” Singing also kept women's hands free to do other work simultaneously.

Beth herself had attempted to accompany step dancing with puirt-a-beul:

[I have] tried it a couple of times, just fooling around. But I've never done it. I think I'd probably turn too blue from lack of air. Unless you have somebody doing it with you, really to do it for somebody to dance to—you'd have to have better breath control than what I have. Or have somebody else with you so you'd have a chance to catch your breath now and again.

It is odd that Beth believes that puirt-a-beul should be sung solo and unaccompanied even though this would make it extremely difficult to accompany step dancing. Even though Beth sings puirt-a-beul with her daughter, she explains why she is glad that Gaelic song is normally done solo: “You can do [Gaelic song] a cappella. That's the big saving grace

with being able to be a performer in Gaelic is that you don't have to have someone else with you. And I don't play any instruments so that certainly makes a big difference.”

Although Beth asserts that puirt-a-beul have always been a part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture sung to accompany children's dancing, she felt uncomfortable speculating on the origins of puirt-a-beul:

I'm not sure that I really would say that I have any knowledge of what the origins are. Just that it's probably a very old art form. That it's been around for a long, long time. Which, like I say, makes me think that it has the basic rhythms for dance. Maybe puirt-a-beul's been around before instruments. I really don't know. It would be interesting if somebody could tell you! But just the fact of, you know—people say, like, with the vocables and stuff like that, like maybe that was almost like a pre-language or something. I heard somebody say that one time. I don't think there's any way to really know what the origins were or what it originally was exactly for. If it was a pre-language, was it then for dance in some ancient Celtic society? Is that where strathspeys, jigs and reels originated as tunes? You know, the fiddle and the pipes. I mean, which came first, the song or the instrument? Maybe it is the song, maybe it is the voice that's the original instrument.

Despite Beth's recognition of the fact that puirt-a-beul tend to be devalued by native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers, she describes puirt-a-beul as an “art form,” using a term that actually suggests puirt-a-beul's significance. Their possible age also lends them legitimacy. Beth's description provides a clue to her own interest in and valuation of puirt-a-beul: while she believes that others may devalue puirt-a-beul because they were sometimes sung to children and because they are not considered “heavy” songs, she considers them important because of their long, continuous history.

Yet however long their history, puirt-a-beul have not survived without change:

[Colin Watson and I] were talking about puirt-a-beul and we were just kind of speculating. People say how it's not a real popular form here in Cape Breton and

most people learning puirt-a-beul are learning them off of a tape. And him and I were kind of speculating that maybe the puirt-a-beul that we're learning is changed. Like the timing, with regard to being able to dance to it. ... So we were saying that sometimes, maybe now, the reason that the rhythm in some of the puirt-a-beuls isn't exactly correct for Cape Breton step dancing is maybe that in this day and age, most of the puirt-a-beul people are learning here aren't coming from the mouth of a tradition bearer, it's coming off of a cassette or something out of Scotland or—That's been the norm, I think, for people who learned puirt-a-beul within the last 50 years or so anyway, I would say. So I'm just thinking that maybe the rhythm of puirt-a-beul has changed in Scotland because they don't have the [step] dance tradition.

Because puirt-a-beul gradually became less popular in Cape Breton, singers interested in them have had to turn to Scottish commercial recordings. However, because step dancing no longer exists in Scotland (if indeed it ever did – cf. Chapter 6), Scottish puirt-a-beul rhythms have gradually changed, making them unsuitable for step dance accompaniment, ensuring their continued devaluation in Cape Breton.

With Beth's connection between puirt-a-beul and dance, she emphasized the importance of their rhythm: "What should be the defining characteristics—I'm not sure if it is the defining characteristic—would be the proper rhythm for them to be dance tunes."

When Beth sang at the Highland Village Inn ceilidh, she performed the port-a-beul, "Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean," which was the first single released from Mary Jane Lamond's second album, *Suas e!* Even though Beth sang it in a relatively straightforward and traditional manner, Mary Jane Lamond's version incorporates numerous pop elements. Asked how she felt about the "popification" of puirt-a-beul on commercial recordings, Beth believes that these recordings are valuable:

I think it's good that they put them out. It's good for people to hear Gaelic in any kind of a venue. Like I said before, even for myself as a performer, it depends on

what you think your audience is what you're going to do. So obviously they feel that there is an audience out there for *puirt-a-beul*. Particularly for the rhythms and like I say, the fact that people are entertained by it. I think that's their purpose in putting it out and that's what it's all about for musicians, is having people buy your tapes or come to your concerts. That's what it's about for them. And if it makes more people question what is this we're hearing and want to find out more about it, then it's definitely serving a positive purpose.

Instead of fearing that Gaelic pop songs would present only a limited, shallow representation of Gaelic culture, Beth feels that they have the potential to draw people further into Gaelic culture. The pop medium allows Gaelic song to reach more people than traditional Gaelic song alone. She also accepts that musicians too need to make a living, and does not worry about cultural appropriation. Gaelic songs are freely available to anyone who wishes to use them, including herself.

Ultimately, Beth expressed a guardedly optimistic view of the future of the Gaelic language in Cape Breton:

Right now, I think it's looking more positive than I've seen it look since I started trying to learn Gaelic. There's still a long, long way to go before it will ever be a real day-to-day spoken language anywhere on this island again. Maybe in small pockets at some point. But it seems that the places where people are really getting a hold on it tend to be scattered ... They're supposed to start [Gaelic language classes] this year in the school down here in Iona so that would be a major, major development if it happens. It's just that it's slow coming and I'm just hoping that it'll get a foothold strong enough before it fades away. Other than in the point with the learners, you know what I mean. I would like to see something happen that there would still be native Gaelic speakers. People coming up, growing up being native Gaelic speakers as opposed to—Like, there's, I don't know how many of us around. Like me and yourself. We're adults and we're trying to learn and yes we will probably get an amount where we can talk about the weather to somebody, we can greet somebody, we can maybe have a bit of a conversation, whatever. But I think there's a whole lot of people that will only go that far and not become fluent speakers. I don't see myself becoming a fluent speaker. I think maybe I just jumped into the pool a little bit too late. But hopefully, you know, it'll stay, it'll keep catching on here and it'll grow. And the *Fèis* movement

throughout the Island is getting stronger. So it's nice to see positive things happening but I'm still not totally optimistic that the result will be as good as what we would like it to be.

Small, geographically disparate communities, such as Mabou and Iona, are considered Gaelic centres because they each contain a number of native Gaelic speakers. At one time, Gaelic was spoken throughout central Cape Breton but it is now rarely spoken conversationally except during special Gaelic cultural events, such as milling frolics, which draw Gaelic speakers together from across Cape Breton. Not only does Beth believe that Gaelic language instruction should be reintroduced to the schools, but she also believes that children should be instilled with a pride of Gaelic. Language maintenance is important to Beth because “how can a people know where they are going if they have no knowledge of where they have been? There is a Gaelic proverb that states, *Daoine gun cànan, daoine gun anam*: ‘People without a language, people without a soul’” (personal communication, May 17, 1999).

In closing, I offered Beth the opportunity to add anything she felt we had not yet covered. Beth added, “I just like [puirt-a-beul]. It's fun. When you're performing, it's nice to, a lot of times, feel that you're giving the audience something they can enjoy.”

5.3 James MacNeil

Jamie is Rod's younger brother by four and a half years. His dry sense of humour often made me uncertain whether he was joking or not. Jamie was another of the singers encountered at the Highland Village Inn milling frolic. When he heard that I was in Cape

Breton to study puirt-a-beul, he told me to “Get some real songs!” I was not entirely certain how seriously he meant the comment, but after interviewing Jamie I realized that although he has some concerns about puirt-a-beul, he does in fact like them.

Jamie is a distinguished, older gentleman. Although he is known for his sharp witticisms, he avoided them during our interview. Instead, Jamie proved to be an articulate consultant who had thought through many of the issues raised during our interview. He is clearly passionate about and cares deeply for Gaelic language and culture. Even though Jamie is at least functionally bilingual in Gaelic, he denied fluency:

I don't consider myself fluent to this day, though I've been working at it quite diligently for the past twenty-five years since I came back to Cape Breton [from living in Ontario]. No, my parents didn't speak Gaelic to me at home although they were certainly fluent. Very fluent. They could speak it, read it and write it. But it wasn't the fashion at that time [to speak it and therefore they did not speak it to me].

He argued that he could not be considered a Gael according to a dictionary definition of the term (personal communication, May, 1999), but I believe that he is considered equivalent to a native Gaelic speaker within the community. This “native equivalency” is due, in part, to his efforts to learn the language, but also to his Gaelic background:

I learned quite a bit [as a child]. You couldn't help but learn it! I'd say for two reasons: one of the things is that—I was born in 1929—through the 30s, the community would've been a Gaelic-speaking community. Virtually all the adults would've spoken Gaelic and there may even have been the odd one that didn't even have English or very poor English. So a lot of these people came to the house or were in the community where we heard the language spoken. Or I heard the language spoken on a daily basis pretty well. It wasn't directed at me but I was a part of it.

Jamie went on to explain that the lack of central heating in Cape Breton homes meant that people congregated in the kitchen around the stove, where it was warm. He would have been exposed to the Gaelic conversation between his parents and any visitors, even if it were not directed at him. By the time Jamie was a teenager, he was able to understand almost anything spoken. However, he made no particular effort to learn the language formally.

It was not until Jamie reached middle age that he began to make an effort to cultivate his Gaelic language skills:

If I wasn't [interested] when I was younger, I certainly was interested by the time I was just about forty. I was just over forty when I came back to Cape Breton. It just seemed so important! I didn't figure I was complete until I had Gaelic. I wasn't a true Gael certainly until I had Gaelic. I wanted to be a Gael.

Jamie laughed at his statements, as though they embarrassed him, but it was clear that he felt strongly about his identity as a Gael. Despite having had Gaelic-speaking parents and having been born and raised in Cape Breton, Jamie would not call himself a Gael without Gaelic fluency. For Jamie, a culture without a language has no soul (personal communication, May, 1999).

He believes that he has a responsibility to promote the Gaelic language. When asked how the language should be maintained, he replied:

Work on it. Get people enthusiastic about it and try to impress upon them the value of it and what we're losing by losing the language, which is certainly the warp and woof of any culture, as far as I'm concerned. It's the backbone of it. The other things derive from that. It's our heritage. Why should we deny it to future generations? I think it should be a responsibility to try to keep it alive.

For his own part, Jamie makes a point of attending milling frolics throughout Cape Breton. He also teaches Gaelic songs at *Fèis nan Òran* in Iona and he attends as many Gaelic workshops and courses as he is able, including the Gaelic immersion week at St. Ann's Gaelic college. Although he attends the college in order to improve his Gaelic, he is also a valuable resource for those students from outside the Cape Breton area who wish to practise speaking the language with a Cape Breton Gael.

If language is key to a culture, could a non-Cape Breton Gaelic learner—such as myself—become part of the Gaelic culture with language fluency? Jamie exclaimed,

Oh, I hope so, sure! I find that some of the people, outsiders, that have come into Cape Breton and learned Gaelic, they are some of the best promoters of the language you can find. They have more enthusiasm and probably get more out of it—or seem to appreciate the value of it—than we ourselves do, the natives.

Because Jamie is an activist and believes in the value of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, he is willing to accept anyone with similar values as members of the culture.

Jamie taught himself Gaelic by taking Gaelic courses and workshops as they arose, by attending milling frolics, and by socializing with people who were also interested in speaking Gaelic. Interestingly, he noted that he rarely speaks Gaelic to his brother, Rod, despite their regular contact since they never spoke Gaelic to each other in the past and it therefore seems odd to do so now. Jamie did not sing—other than to the cows or to himself—before he started taking up Gaelic.

Although Jamie cannot read music, he learns a tune by repeated listening. He learns the lyrics from print, whether it is from music provided by a choir director, from a

published song collection, or some other transcription. He explained how he first got involved in Gaelic song:

I belonged to the Gaelic Society in Sydney, *Comunn Gaidhlig Ceap Breatuinn*. It was the Cape Breton Gaelic Society. And we always had singing there. There were at that time—that would be in the ‘70s—there were still a good many people around who spoke Gaelic and sang Gaelic. The older generation. That’s what we did. Just learned from listening mostly. And of course we’d be going [to the Society] and learning it: we’d have somebody to go over the songs and help us with the words and read it and so on.

Asked what kinds of songs he would have sung with the Gaelic Society choir, he stated:

“Well, not puirt-a-beul! Milling songs. Almost any kind of song. Just Gaelic songs.

That was it. Milling songs would be a big part because they were in demand.”

Jamie responded to my query about the popularity of milling songs:

Well, I think any Gaelic song virtually would be popular if you had a good opportunity to sing them. But the opportunity for singing presents itself at these milling frolics. You don’t have to be a great singer to begin with. That’s why I have chanced [one] or two. And people seem to like them. And maybe they’re just easier to sing. They have concerts and so forth and at concerts, you’ll hear Gaelic songs but very few: ... two or three [are] about as many as you’re going to hear at almost any concert. Even at a big concert, like they have in Broad Cove where there are thousands of people around.

According to Jamie, a lack of good Gaelic singers has meant that Gaelic song rarely gets performed on a concert program. Formal concerts require competent soloists prepared to perform in front of an audience. Meanwhile, milling frolics are less stressful. Their audiences are rarely large. Singers have the support of the other participants during the choruses and they sing to each other rather than to an audience. The division between singer and audience is blurred at a milling frolic where anyone can sing along with the

choruses and take a turn singing a solo. Furthermore, the songs are not terribly difficult, making them ideal for Gaelic learners and singers of all levels:

We have a fair number of younger singers singing who, in many cases, don't speak Gaelic but they do learn the songs and very often they're good singers. Usually they are. Their Gaelic may not be top notch but they're still good to listen to.

Jamie also compared milling songs to puirt-a-beul:

The milling songs, there's usually a bit of a story to them. I think virtually all puirt-a-beul are totally nonsense. Just totally nonsense. And it's just playing with words and using them to make music. And they're good! They're really good. They're kind of fun to know what they're saying sometimes.

Jamie, as a serious Gaelic language and culture learner, always wants to know the meaning, both literal and metaphorical, behind song lyrics. Furthermore, he enjoys the humour of many puirt-a-beul lyrics.

Jamie had no problem with non-Gaelic speaking singers:

Good luck to them! I just hope they continue [to study Gaelic]. As they sing, it's an incentive to learn the language (if they like to sing Gaelic songs). It's an incentive to learn the language. In some cases, I think that's what prompts them in the first place—to get into the Gaelic—is just from hearing the singing. And this seems to grab a hold of them sometimes.

Although Jamie may link Gaelic identity to language, he believes that singing is an important step toward understanding and learning it. He believes that the sound of the music—rather than the meaning of the words – can appeal to some people strongly enough to cause them to pursue Gaelic language studies.

Puirt-a-beul have recently become popular amongst Gaelic learners because, according to Jamie, they are easy to learn due to their repetitiveness and short length

(personal communication, May, 1999). However, while Jamie believes that puirt-a-beul are an important part of the culture worthy of being maintained (ibid.), he believes that they have become prominent at the expense of other song types:

I don't hate puirt-a-beul by any means, by any means whatsoever! What I say about puirt-a-beul is that it's taking the place in singing nowadays that it didn't used to have. Years ago, I don't remember hearing anybody singing puirt-a-beul at a concert. I can't remember any [puirt-a-beul] fifty years ago.

Puirt-a-beul were not part of concert repertoire until recently. Previously, they may have been part of women's private lore (cf. Chapter 6.2.a and 6.4.d) and were therefore not heard publicly. Now he hears more puirt-a-beul at concerts but he laments that there are fewer Gaelic songs programmed overall (personal communication, May, 1999).

Jamie remembers when Na h-Oganaich, a Scottish musical group consisting of four young people, came to Cape Breton in 1973. They sang a lot of puirt-a-beul and "little, ditty-type songs" which he felt were insubstantial. Jamie wondered, "when are they going to start singing some real, big, story songs?" (personal communication, May 1999). Jamie believes that puirt-a-beul have grown in popularity in Cape Breton because language learners access them from commercial Scottish Gaelic recordings. He also noted that the majority of singers recording puirt-a-beul are Gaelic learners themselves (particularly in Cape Breton) and often they cannot speak the language at all (personal communication, May, 1999). In other words, puirt-a-beul are popular amongst cultural beginners rather than fluent Gaelic speakers.

Jamie speculated why singers record puirt-a-beul:

Well, it's probably easier to learn, for one thing. There's usually no more than three verses to them so if they can manage to learn these three verses, they can keep repeating them. And, of course, one of the things they're doing is just throwing in the instrumentals with this. Which is all right but it certainly makes it easier for them which I suppose is why they're doing it. [You can] cover up a lot of sins with music!

Jamie again focuses on language rather than on musical aspects. He protested that singers generally tend to repeat verses and choruses, even with more serious song types. When he listens to these arrangements, Jamie finds himself wondering, "Why don't you learn another verse?" (personal communication, May 1999). However, while *puirt-a-beul* may be easy to sing because they are short and repetitive, he admits that they are difficult to perform well since the lyrics are tongue-twisters (*ibid.*). Their linguistic difficulty means that instrumental accompaniment can assist a singer by covering up any "sins" or mistakes made in pronunciation.

However much Jamie is frustrated by *puirt-a-beul*'s current popularity, he still believes that they are a valuable part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Jamie enjoys the way "*puirt-a-beul* play with words" (personal communication, May, 1999). He likes their assonance and the way the vowels bounce off one another (*ibid.*). Jamie feels that the music is in the words and therefore instrumental accompaniment can spoil *puirt-a-beul*. In general, Jamie finds that instrumental accompaniment in any Gaelic song too often cover the lyrics; Jamie emphasizes that the words should be given priority.

Meanwhile, Jamie's experience with *puirt-a-beul* has, in the past, been minimal. Jamie struggled to recall whether his mother sang *puirt-a-beul* (his father did not sing). He guessed that she sang them occasionally about the house ("she must've!"), although

rarely. She never taught Jamie puirt-a-beul or any other Gaelic song, unless one of her children was required to sing publicly for some reason. Jamie believes that, in the past:

It was a home thing, puirt-a-beul. For the kids and at home and just having fun. Where do our tunes come from that are played on the fiddle? A good many have puirt-a-beul associated with them. The mouth music was probably there first—you know, the vocals were there to begin with and then they put it on a fiddle, I guess, or the bagpipes.

Jamie associates puirt-a-beul with: the home, children, amusement, and tune transmission. In this scenario, puirt-a-beul are an informal, domestic song type, not necessarily appropriate for public performance. They are entertaining rather than serious, and important because they form the foundation of instrumental tunes.

Jamie denied knowing many puirt-a-beul although he believes that there are “a few hundred” in existence, many associated with the multitude of fiddle tunes currently played in Cape Breton. Jamie only connected puirt-a-beul with dance when asked how he could identify puirt-a-beul: “Well, I think they’re usually a strathspey or a reel to begin with. Usually. So that would mean they’re dancing tunes ... It’s usually lively.”

Although Jamie did not emphasize puirt-a-beul’s connection to dance, he told me that he had seen step dancing done to the accompaniment of puirt-a-beul on more than one occasion. He did not specify whether one person sang and danced simultaneously or whether one person accompanied another, although the latter scenario is considered to be the “standard” means of accompanying dance with puirt-a-beul. He remembered at least one recent instance (within the previous few years). He had never seen any other type of dancing done to puirt-a-beul.

Instead of discussing puirt-a-beul's connection to dance, Jamie focused on the importance of puirt-a-beul to the instrumental traditions:

They keep telling us that it was used an awful lot in place of instrumental music years and years ago. We're talking about a couple of hundred years ago and more than that when musical instruments were scarce and in some cases, they were frowned upon or maybe banned altogether. It had its place there. But also, just people sang it, sang puirt-a-beul. It was a song! Not maybe a sensible song, but it's still a song! They're fun songs. They're crazy but they're good. The music is good that goes with them: I don't understand what the fiddle is "saying" but I still like the music!

Jamie's "they" seems to refer to Gaelic culture experts, such as academics, published authors, and Scots Gaels. He seems uncertain about the veracity of the official puirt-a-beul origin story but he is not prepared to challenge it. Although he has not contradicted his earlier belief that puirt-a-beul pre-existed their related instrumental tunes, one must wonder why they would have come into existence prior to the necessity created in the above scenario (i.e. lack of instruments).

Conversation returned to Jamie's belief that Gaelic culture must be promoted and maintained in Cape Breton:

There should be an opportunity provided in the schools to learn it. And the government should pay for that the same as they pay for other education. It would be a help. But also, well it's just up to the people that understand it. I mean, I don't understand it literally but understand the meaning of this great heritage, what's left with us. It's up to us to get other people to understand it and know about it and to appreciate it.

Jamie had already mentioned that he believes that language is the soul of a culture. He used the Canadian French as an example of how strongly people feel about their language. Gaelic defines Jamie (personal communication, May, 1999). However, even

though Jamie considers the Gaelic language essential to Cape Breton Gaelic culture and to himself, and even though he makes a considerable effort to promote Gaelic culture, his view of the future of Gaelic is pessimistic:

[The future of Gaelic is] slow death. It won't survive as a really robust, living language. It'll probably survive in some manner. There will be people around for another couple of generations anyway, I guess, who will be able to speak it and maybe help to maintain some element of its presence here. But that'll be about it.

Since the National Mòd in Scotland has proven very effective at promoting Gaelic language and song, I asked Jamie if he felt a mòd could be of any use locally:

Maybe it sparks some interest in the language, I don't know. I can't see that—we don't have much in the line of Mòds here, really. There is a Mòd—it goes by that name—in St Ann's. And it's been there since 1938, I believe was the first year. But this implies competition and really, I don't know if this competition adds very much to the culture. Maybe it does. They certainly make a big deal of it over in Scotland where they have thousands of people at their competitions and I think a couple of thousand people actually participating. But that doesn't apply here. You know, as far as competition goes, if we had a competition in, say, fiddling around Cape Breton here, we don't have to go to a Mòd to know who the best fiddlers are. The best fiddler may not win the prize, but we know. It's just a consensus that so-and-so is the best. Or at least one of the best. And this applies to piping or step dancing or singing, which are really the most important. These things I just mentioned are really the most important aspects of our musical culture, I think as far as the Gaels of Cape Breton are concerned.

Jamie questions the point of competition in a culture as small as Cape Breton's since there is no need to formalize what is already generally understood. He resists the idea that competition could be a valuable motivator, but he does not refuse to consider that it could be good for the culture.

Ultimately, Jamie's passion for Gaelic language and culture has resulted in his concern that *puirt-a-beul*'s current popularity is at the expense of other, "heavier," Gaelic

songs. Jamie's apparent antagonism towards puirt-a-beul proved to be not entirely accurate. Jamie iterated several times that he considers puirt-a-beul fun. However, the fact that Jamie considers language of primary importance to the Gaelic culture, along with his belief that puirt-a-beul are largely lyrically nonsensical, makes puirt-a-beul of lesser interest than other Gaelic song genres. He seems to fear that puirt-a-beul's current prominence does not accurately represent their historical place in Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Fifty years ago, according to Jamie, puirt-a-beul were hardly ever heard in public whereas now they are frequently performed. Jamie fears that this change is not in the best interest of Gaelic culture.

5.4 Margo Carruthers

My interview with Margo Carruthers was an interesting experience as it also involved two of her beginning Gaelic students from Halifax, who were in Iona to see Margo perform at the Highland Village Day concert in August. Judith Forbes and Wendy Murray allowed Margo to be the focus of the interview, but they interjected a number of comments and asked so many questions that I was nearly unnecessary. It was a very dynamic and successful interview.

I was fortunate to meet Margo when I was in Halifax, conducting research before heading to Cape Breton. I attended a meeting of the Harbour Folk Society, of which Margo is a member. She performed a couple of Gaelic songs that she had also recorded for the Society's newly released CD, *Harbour Folks: Music and Song from the Harbour*

Folk Society. She was very approachable and friendly. When she heard the nature of my research, she mentioned that she knew a number of puirt-a-beul but, unfortunately, I was unable to interview her at that time.

However, it turned out that Margo had just finished recording her first solo album, *Tàlant nam Bàrd* (“The Talent of the Bards”) with B&R Heritage Enterprises, the same company which had produced Mary Jane Lamond’s first CD. The CD consists of Gaelic songs, most of which were composed in Cape Breton. It also includes a set of puirt-a-beul although they were originally from Scotland. I was able to interview Margo while she was in Cape Breton, promoting her new CD, and I was able to hear her perform on a number of occasions.

Margo is middle-aged with an idiosyncratic sense of humour. Her jokes, taken at face value, can sometimes seem harsh but her positive demeanour, accessibility, and constant laughter make it clear that she never means to denigrate anything. Because of this, a print-only description of our interview leaves something to be desired; it is important that Margo’s laughter be kept in mind at all times as one reads about her. Margo always makes an effort to understand all sides of an argument, which sometimes puts her in a difficult position, as can occasionally be seen in our interview.

Because Margo is so involved with song, I wondered if she taught Gaelic song classes specifically. She replied, “No, I teach language. And we do about forty-five minutes of songs [in each two-and-a-half hour lesson]. And I started [learning] Gaelic about eight years ago.” She was asked to teach a Gaelic beginners’ class when she herself

was still learning the language. She told me that, “if I had known how hard it was going to be, I’d have had second thoughts about it ... I knew some stuff but I sure didn’t know everything and I sure didn’t have answers for all those questions that were coming my way.”

She explained how she approaches teaching: “I like to make it fun. People come in and they laugh a lot. It’s almost like Gaelic therapy. And then you learn! You can’t *not* learn!” Wendy, who throughout the interview repeatedly emphasized how important the Gaelic language is to her, asked Margo if she thought that it was possible for people to be “turned off” of Gaelic, depending on the teacher. Margo answered, “I think you can be turned off by personalities. I think if you go in as a learner to someone who doesn’t respect your individuality, yeah, you can be scared away. But not once you’re in it. I don’t think you can be scared away by the Devil himself.” This strong statement indicates how compelling Margo finds the Gaelic language.

Despite Margo’s belief that she offers an entertaining learning environment, she declared that she is only capable of teaching adults:

Not everybody can teach Gaelic. A native speaker can have Gaelic to die for but that doesn’t mean they’re competent in teaching. There is some kind of magic to reach out and get people to pay attention. I have some ability with adult learners. I wouldn’t put myself with little kids. I think you need a native speaker who’s bang bang bang. But warm. And friendly. And funny. Or if not a native speaker, then someone who’s darn close. Really, really good. And you got to make Gaelic fun. If you go to a primary class and watch a primary teacher interact with those little monsters, it’s hard work.

This is an issue in Cape Breton, since there are no certified Gaelic teachers available for the new programmes being initiated in Iona/Christmas Island and other Cape Breton areas.

Because of her strong musical background, Margo incorporates a lot of songs in her Gaelic lessons: “That makes it easy for learners to get their tongues around those syllables. It’s sort of like aerobics, you know, where you don’t feel like you’re working sometimes. You’re just having fun. There’s a whole bunch at play. It’s psychological.” Gaelic song forces Gaelic learners to engage with the language, but singing does not seem as difficult as, for example, working through grammatical exercises. She further explained that:

I’ve been bringing in field recordings of the older people like [Cape Bretoner] Malcolm Angus MacLellan. And I mean he’s a fabulous singer, a wonderful voice. Some of the older guys on tape, their singing leaves a bit to be desired. Maybe they were nervous. Maybe they weren’t really good singers but they knew some tunes. You have to think about that when you’re bringing it into beginners because again, you don’t want to frighten them. But there’s not a Gaelic song that isn’t worth learning. It’s just that, how are you ever going to learn them all? You can’t. You have to choose. And like *puirt[-a-beul]*, I don’t think there is a part that people wouldn’t want to learn.

Margo is careful with Gaelic beginners. She does not want to overwhelm them. My feeling from the interview is that Margo carefully selects what she considers to be the most accessible Gaelic songs. Some field recordings of Gaelic songs may sound so foreign to learners that they might feel there was no common ground between them and the Gaelic culture, and therefore quit.

Puirt-a-beul are an accessible Gaelic song type since they are musically appealing even without an understanding of the lyrics (cf. Chapter 6). Additionally, the lyrics incorporate simple vocabulary and are repetitive. Margo told me why she herself likes puirt-a-beul and includes them in her classes:

Puirt are excellent learning tools not only because of repetitive vowels, consonants, words or phrases but also for breaking down barriers between students in a classroom setting. Mistakes are inevitable and equal. These mistakes lead to laughter, which relaxes the class so that they are “free” from self-consciousness very quickly. They start comparing mistakes leading to more laughter. Friendships are formed and trusts develop so that soon the class is a “unit” intent on learning and improving their skills together without fear of so-called “failure.” They learn and learn to love to learn. I have taken “flak” from some in Cape Breton who feel strongly that the *only* way to teach Gaelic song is to have learners sing milling song choruses. This may work for some teachers and certain musically challenged students; however, it would bore the hell out of me and limit the opportunity to challenge my students both linguistically and psychologically. For that I choose the puirt, and I make *no apologies* (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

The primary attraction of puirt-a-beul is their entertainment value, both in the sense of the lyrics and in the learning process. The tongue-twister-like lyrics result in inevitable and amusing errors, whereas mistakes in a more serious song would not be laughable.

Presumably, the humorous aspect of puirt-a-beul would prevent Gaelic learners from becoming frustrated with their mistakes and encourage them to continue learning the language. Margo reminded Judith and Wendy of a highly alliterative puirt-a-beul they had learned in class: “it’s just wonderful. We used to be doubled over in hysterics trying to learn it.” Puirt-a-beul are an important pedagogical tool for Margo because they go beyond music and language to help students interact with each other. Puirt-a-beul help make her classes into a community of learners.

Although Margo uses Gaelic song as an entry point to Cape Breton Gaelic culture, she admitted that she rarely has access to live singers. She gets her resources:

Off tapes and from print sources, mostly. Not from any living soul, no. In fact, with these two [Judith and Wendy] and the students that I have, they're at the mercy of what I bring in. So it's up to me to find puirt. I mean, I'm fortunate in one way because I've got Rosemary [McCormack] and her tie into puirt but again, she's got Scottish stuff. She's got puirt from Scotland. But she has been trying really hard in the last umpteen years to track down stuff from different people locally. She has a collection of local people as well. I mean, most everybody that has good Gaelic—like Jim Watson: he's got a collection ... John Shaw was here collecting bundles. There's all kinds at St FX [St. Francis Xavier University], as you know. But I don't know how many of the actual living, breathing Gaels can sing you puirt.

Margo finds herself in a difficult position: she wants to introduce her students to Cape Breton Gaelic culture, she knows that puirt-a-beul are very effective pedagogically and she believes that puirt-a-beul were once a regular part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. However, because she does not believe there are many living Cape Bretoners who are familiar with puirt-a-beul, she resorts to using published and recorded sources, or she learns Scottish puirt-a-beul from Rosemary.

At first I assumed that Margo's students demanded puirt-a-beul but Margo later corrected my assumption:

My students (at least at the beginners' level) invariably ask for milling songs. Most of them have Cape Breton roots and are obsessed with milling songs. Only two out of close to one hundred students have ever specifically asked for puirt. Those two were musicians (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

This obsession with milling songs is not restricted to her students; Margo believes that the reason puirt-a-beul have gradually stopped being sung by native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers “[has] to do with milling songs, I think. And socialization.” Milling songs have

survived in part because they are social songs. It is relatively easy to learn to sing a milling song when one hears it repeatedly at different frolics. There are fewer opportunities to hear puirt-a-beul, since they are usually sung as solos. To learn puirt-a-beul would require a more concerted effort.

Interestingly, despite Margo's students' requests for milling songs, Margo feels that her milling song repertoire is minimal: "I'm weak in milling songs because I don't live in Cape Breton. I don't travel to Cape Breton to just visit relatives. I don't have a great deal of friends in Cape Breton so my lack is milling songs." Meanwhile, Margo has collected more puirt-a-beul than anyone else I interviewed: "My regret is that I don't have enough [puirt]. I mean forty, fifty puirt is not nearly enough." No one else I spoke with admitted knowing even close to that number.

Although Margo does not consider milling songs as effective pedagogically as puirt-a-beul, which may be a result of the fact that she does not have a broad milling song repertoire. On the other hand, the value of puirt-a-beul in the language classroom may have caused Margo to seek puirt-a-beul—which she knows to be effective—at the expense of milling songs.

While a large proportion of Margo's teaching time is spent on song, she argued, "I refuse to teach music and not language. I mean I have no trouble carrying a tune. But I don't want to have a song class and say, 'OK, let's go sing some cutesy Gaelic songs.'" Margo fears that too much song would give a shallow impression of Gaelic culture, the

sophistication of which only becomes apparent with knowledge of the language. She also argued that the Gaelic language is important because

We can't learn the idioms [without Gaelic]. We don't see the world that way. We don't think like that. So those old idioms that describe something, that something doesn't exist. At least, not in those words, in the way we see things ... Even the expressions for putting someone down were while praising somebody. It's all tied to another way of looking at the world. And we don't have that.

Knowledge of the Gaelic language is important because it helps people to understand a specific cultural worldview. As in the translation of any language into any other, Gaelic idioms lose something when rendered in English.

It is perhaps not surprising that Margo focuses so much on song in her Gaelic classes since she herself was first attracted to Gaelic through song. She recalled the first time she heard a Gaelic song: "It was the Rankins singing 'Chi Mi Na Morbheanna' ['I will see the great mountains']. And my ears just love putting harmonies to everything and I heard those harmonies—I mean, that's the most beautiful arrangement of 'Chi Mi Na Morbheanna' that I've ever heard." The Rankin Family sings their Gaelic lyrics phonetically since they are not fluent in Gaelic, and they have been criticized not only for incorrect Gaelic pronunciation but also for having added unnecessary musical accompaniment and harmonies. Margo addressed these issues:

["Chi Mi na Morbheanna" is] not traditional in that all those synthesizers and harmony—I mean, it's a bit over the top, really. But for my ears, it dragged me in. Gaelic flaws aside—I mean, we can look back and say, "Oh, they were flawed in their Gaelic," sure. But that's also how many years ago? Hopefully their Gaelic is better now. I just wanted to learn Gaelic songs.

Once Margo decided she wanted to learn Gaelic songs, she began Gaelic language lessons. She only became aware of the criticisms levelled at The Rankin Family once she became more familiar with the culture. Despite the so-called problems with the recording, she was drawn to Gaelic culture. At this stage in her cultural awareness, she still appears to be attracted to this particular song but she also feels it necessary to qualify her appreciation of it.

However many Gaelic songs Margo may have and use in her classes, she feels that she lacks the resources necessary to teach Gaelic thoroughly: “In Halifax, to be honest, we don’t have anybody we can listen to other than tapes and what we seem to get is tapes of Scottish Gaelic instruction and we listen fervently to Cape Breton Gaelic singers.” Although the Gaelic College has published Catriona Parson’s instructional texts, *Gàidhlig Troimh Chòmhradh*, and B&R Heritage Enterprises has produced some instructional recordings, both of which Margo uses, Haligonians “are at a disadvantage” when it comes to have access to resources (personal communication, May 12, 1999). On the other hand, Margo believes that Haligonians’ lack of resources has kept them from taking the Gaelic culture for granted: “We’re sort of out of it. Out of the loop, if you think about it. We’re not in Cape Breton all the time. So we’re not included. We’re so used to doing so much on our own. We have to dig harder. We don’t take any of it for granted. We have to make things happen for ourselves.”

Margo lamented that the native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers who used to visit Halifax and participate in milling frolics no longer make the trip:

There used to be, at the seniors' centre, when the Gaelic Society was a little bit younger and bigger—had more people in it—there were times when people like Maxie [MacNeil] and certain other people from up here [in Cape Breton] would come down. A huge, big group of people would come. It would be live. And we would join in and sing with them ... And that was an excuse for getting in with them and learning. But we didn't have a [milling] table. The table helps with the rhythmic pulse. We never had that. We never had that at all. You can only get that up here.

Margo finds that live interaction with Gaelic speakers is important for Gaelic learners. It is also relevant that the interaction occurs through song.

Judith wondered what purpose Gaelic education served if everyone eventually moved away.¹ Margo acknowledged that while they may not speak the language,

All these people sing. They'll take with them the Gaelic song. If they didn't learn any Gaelic, they wouldn't have the Gaelic songs but because they've been in the Gaelic culture, learning the language and singing the songs, they'll not forget them. They'll not forget them at all ... I think that you have to do something. I think that if we have it in the schools, that's better than rolling over and playing dead. It's like "here come the English; let's surrender!"

Songs are the key to the retention of the Gaelic language and culture. Even though the language may not survive in its "pure" form, Margo clearly believes that the songs will live on with or without the language.

This brings me back to *puirt-a-beul*. If songs will eventually be the last active remnant of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, and if Margo concentrates on *puirt-a-beul* in her classes, *puirt-a-beul* could conceivably be the songs that survive beyond the confines of Cape Breton and perhaps beyond the lifespan of the Gaelic language itself. I did not

¹ Local economic difficulties since World War II have forced many Cape Bretoners to search for jobs elsewhere in Canada (cf. Chapter 3.2).

think to ask—and Margo did not volunteer—whether puirt-a-beul are the best representatives of Gaelic culture.

What Margo did explain was why she thinks puirt-a-beul have not generally been incorporated in Gaelic song collections:

If you talk to the people here who sing the milling songs, they'll tell you stories of how, when the collectors came to collect the milling songs or collect songs in general, it was usually in a social setting where there would be a table set up and they'd sing a milling song. And then a collector might say, "Well, do you have any more songs?" Well, they'd assume he meant more milling songs so they'd sing some more milling songs. So there seems to be a great amount of milling songs collected and very few other songs ... Because of the fun of the singing of milling songs in a group with your friends ... that was what they tended to like to do. And then there would be piping and dancing and fiddling. There didn't seem to be as much time for puirt.

As social songs, milling songs were the genre of song most often sung in public and which thereby came to the attention of collectors. Unaware of other song types, collectors did not know to ask for puirt-a-beul and singers did not think to volunteer them. On the other hand, it is worth noting that many Cape Breton Gaelic song collectors were Gaelic speakers themselves (for instance, John Lorne Campbell) and were likely aware of the existence of puirt-a-beul. Yet puirt-a-beul are still not a part of their collections.

The absence of puirt-a-beul in Gaelic song collections led Margo to associate puirt-a-beul with women:

I know in Dr Helen Creighton's collection, there's an awful lot of songs collected where the informants are men and it's not that there weren't any women. They were in the kitchen making the tea. And that was what was expected. That wasn't anything other than what was normal. But I wonder if that is part of the reason you don't get the lullabies and you don't get the puirt [in the collections].

Women did not expect anyone to consider their contributions valuable. Or they did not believe they had anything to add to the men's contributions. Or again, they waited to be asked to contribute but the collectors never did. Consequently, if women were the ones who sang puirt-a-beul, puirt-a-beul were overlooked. As a result, Gaelic song collections may appear to indicate that milling songs were always as popular as they are at present but this may be inaccurate. Furthermore, collections may have influenced the direction of the active Gaelic song repertoire. Collections may have legitimized certain songs. Published resources made it easy to remember and transmit songs.

Margo later explained how she came to believe that women sang puirt-a-beul:

I have noted that in Margaret Fay Shaw's *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist*, the puirt informants are women. Also, both Alec Currie and Buddy MacMaster, exceptionally fine pipe and fiddler, claim to have learned their tunes and timing from hearing their mothers sing puirt-a-beul. It has also been my observation that within the ranks of my Gaelic students, the women learners "take to" puirt like ducks to water. They seem to have better facility with the structure, percentage-wise, at first. In other words, they catch on quicker than the guys (Is *that* a subject for another thesis or what?) (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

Meanwhile, Margo did not discuss the fact that there are several male musicians and dancers, including Joe Peter MacLean and Willie Fraser, who know and practise puirt-a-beul.

Judith's own understanding of puirt-a-beul is that they are fiddle tunes rendered vocally: "that's what the puirt are: gorgeous fiddle tunes." Judith remarked that she had sung puirt-a-beul along with several tunes played during the course of the concert, including "Am Muilean Dubh" (The Black Mill). Margo responded, "But you don't hear

that at a dance. I mean it's okay for you because you're learners. We're learners. And we like the challenge and the fun of it. But if you go to Glendale to the dance, is anybody singing along?" It is unclear whether she was contradicting the notion that puirt-a-beul are connected to instrumental tunes or whether she was simply lamenting that they are no longer conceived of in that manner.

We turned to a discussion of Margo's new album. Asked how she had learned the songs, she told me that

As a learner, it was harder because you don't know the words and you're sort of doing it really slowly. I never sing something I don't understand. Because you can't. You can't feel it. It's just word salad. You might as well be singing the phone book. You just—I don't know how you do it. You just sing it and practise it and get to become one with it. And that's it. I must confess that I have to work harder on pronunciation because [I'm not] a native speaker. I'm painfully aware of my flaws. I mean, sometimes I can get a word really good and then the next recording or the next tune might have that word flawed somewhat. All it means is that maybe eight times out of ten I do it right. I try. That's the best I can do. But I'm more concerned, to be honest with you, I'm more concerned with—in this project—my concern was the heart, the integrity of these people who wrote these words. They didn't write them because they're getting paid for it. They wrote them cause they felt them. And my job is to sing them as though I wrote them. And I think I do that. Because that was my focus. But that took a long time. I don't regret that. [But] I'd like to get my life back! I'd like to get a vacation! [But] I love Gaelic. I love Gaelic song.

Margo emphasizes three different elements: pronunciation, lyric meaning, and emotion.

While they are connected, she works on them separately. Correct pronunciation is important to an understanding of the lyrics, which is in turn important to feeling the song's intent.

Although Margo never explicitly addressed the melodies or the poetry, she later wrote to say:

Actually, for me, the melodies and the poetry go without saying. They are exceptional and were the main reason for recording the CD in the first place. The poetry is breathtaking and emotional. I wanted to know these men. Men who could express their emotions so poignantly. I had to “get inside” them in order to understand their feelings so I could convey them musically with integrity and heart (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

Margo refuses to work only with a text and a melody. She appreciates that Gaelic songs were written by unique individuals who composed in and for a particular culture. Her holistic approach to learning Gaelic songs reflects her belief that song and language are inextricably intertwined with the overall culture.

She explained why she expended so much energy on pronunciation: “This is a language thing now. I mean this is a language that’s in danger of dying out. If people are going to listen to me singing that language, then I’ve got to be as good at it as possible. Or at least know when I am flawed. And work on it for the next [time]. I can’t do any less.” Margo appears to feel a responsibility to the culture. Although she does not suggest that the culture itself is perishing, she worries about the future of the language. She is aware that her CD may be heard by Gaelic learners and she is aware that they may use her as a model of pronunciation, particularly if there comes a time when there are no native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers left. For the sake of the integrity of the culture, she attempted to sing her songs as like a native Cape Breton Gaelic speaker as possible.

Margo was clear that this recording required a lot of time and commitment from her. Asked why she had agreed to the project, Margo sighed and then answered,

I don’t know. Maybe because music is what I do so I’m not afraid of music. And singing, I mean, is something I’ve done since the dawn of time. Maybe I just felt that I could do it. I mean, I’ve sung in lots of different things. In English. And

Gaelic. Compilations. My Gaelic's getting better and Rosemary [McCormack of B&R Heritage Enterprises] had the faith in me to do it and that made a big difference. Mind you, it's partially terrifying to be given that kind of responsibility. But if you think about it, if you sit and wait to do it, then time will pass by and it won't get done. I mean I'm not getting any younger so it's almost like you have to sort of take a stand and do it.

It would seem that Margo agreed to the project because it offered a challenge while building on her previous musical experiences. However, as she proceeded, the project apparently developed more significance. It became a "responsibility." She later mused that there is a difference between performing Gaelic songs and performing English songs: "Performing is different. It's different. Just performing ... This is the Gaelic. There's some sort of pressure there." It may be that, because there is no present risk to English culture, and because there is a plethora of English singers, Margo feels no particular burden when performing English songs. But it is an entirely different situation when she sings in Gaelic.

She expanded on her reasons for accepting the opportunity to record *Tàlant nam*

Bàrd:

To be honest with you, I don't think I fully realized the extent of it when Rosemary said, "Hey, let's do this" because I'd been used to doing compilations: "You sing your pretty little tune here and someone else will have a turn here," and, you know, blah blah. But this is demanding! Not only do you have to sing the songs nicely, but then you have to talk intelligently about them and the bards [when promoting the album]! I tend to make wisecracks a lot and that's OK but you can't wisecrack the bards because they're serious. Serious stuff! ... The accompaniment to me is tasteful. The vocals are right up top—they're never lost. Every syllable is there, flawed and all! Every single word is there.

Once again, the songs lead to a broader understanding of the culture: Margo is expected not only to sing the songs but also to discuss their lyrics, composers, and historical

context. As well, she emphasizes the importance of the lyrics; although most of the songs on the album are accompanied instrumentally, the accompaniment is meant to support and highlight the texts. The accompaniment is not meant to be equal to the voice, presumably because it had never traditionally been a part of the songs.

The issue of “adding to” Gaelic songs that were traditionally sung a cappella was also discussed. Judith noted that, “The Rankins, they’re livening it up quite a bit, taking something that would’ve been much slower probably traditionally and spicing it up.”

Margo responded:

The main argument [against] it seems to be that people that don’t know Gaelic think this is how Gaelic is supposed to be ... I don’t know how you deal with that. Because it’s true. Those who don’t know any Gaelic will listen to that and think, “Wow, Gaelic’s lovely, Gaelic’s cool. That’s sort of funky.” And then they’ll go and hear real Gaelic and they’ll say, “That’s not Gaelic. What’s that? That’s garbage.” That’s unfair and it’s also unfortunate ... I don’t know how you balance that.

She seems to acknowledge that recording artists have a need or a right to alter traditional music, for whatever reason (such as artistic license, marketability), but she is also aware of the argument that such alterations may result in a false perception of Gaelic culture.

Judith suggested, “puirt is a good way to balance it!” Presumably, Judith means that puirt-a-beul are accessible enough in their traditional, unaccompanied format. In fact, later in the interview, Judith said, “the puirt more than most of the other [Gaelic song genres] get along nicely without accompaniment.” Margo agrees, but added:

I don’t know. [Recording artists are] still taking puirt and twisting it around and doing funky stuff to it. And I personally think that’s just great! I just love that. My ears think that this is super. But those that I know in academic circles are dead-set against it. I sort of feel like I’m walking on a picket fence half the time!

I know I'm going to fall through the crack! But I see both sides. I see both sides in everything. It's not black and it's not white. There's always some grey down the middle but it's like anything else.

Margo is torn between an academic, rational argument against “altered” Gaelic music and her own aesthetic attraction to this same music. And yet, while she recognized the “academic” viewpoint, she asserted that

I don't buy that ... Even Mary Jane, what she's done with her recording [*Suas E!*], she has a balance on it. She's picked real old stuff. She's even let Margaret MacLean [a Cape Breton native Gaelic speaker] sing on it. Then if that's not traditional, what is? So therefore anybody who likes Mary Jane will buy her recording and then they'll listen to the stuff—Surely in the liner notes there must be some reference to traditional music and world beat and that there is a difference: “We're playing with the culture and we're having fun. We're introducing you. This is not ‘the culture.’ This is just music that we happened to think is fun using the language we use in the culture.” Is that a crime? It's not what I did on my recording because I wasn't allowed [*said while laughing*]! Rosemary wouldn't go there. That wasn't what the project was.

Margo believes that the “altered” Gaelic songs will attract listeners to an album and then, as with *Suas E!*, they will hear other, more traditional renditions of Gaelic songs. She hopes that artists take responsibility for their musical alterations but she also expects that listeners will realize that what they hear is not necessarily representative of Gaelic culture.

Margo later justified the alterations of traditional music on commercial recordings:

Modern ears are unaccustomed to the simple beauty of unaccompanied traditional singing; therefore, any business enterprise involved with recording and promoting Gaelic music *must* address the harsh reality that if Gaelic music is to reach a modern audience, that music must be accessible to modern ears or they won't listen. They won't buy it. They won't learn any Gaelic song. If the business fails

to make this music accessible, the business not only fails itself, but the culture as well (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

Margo recognizes the vicious circle: the culture's survival depends on non-Gaels learning the language. Non-Gaels may be attracted to the culture through music, but only if it is accessible. If it sounds too foreign, people will not be interested. But if Gaelic song is altered in the name of promotion, to what are non-Gaels being attracted? Margo hopes that altered Gaelic song can act as a "bridge" to the culture by preserving fundamentally characteristic Gaelic sounds while incorporating non-Gaelic (pop) elements.

While certainly not aspiring to pop, *Tàlant nam Bàrd* incorporates instrumental accompaniment on almost every track. Margo explained:

Compromises are made. In the case of B&R's *Tàlant nam Bàrd*, the instrumental accompaniment is pretty "tame." Hip musicians would call it "old-fashioned" because it is "middle-of-the-road" and in the "easy listening" format. The audience for it would be 30+ in age and somewhat educated both musically and academically. Younger, "hipper" audiences would find it "boring" and would definitely favour the more wildly popular style currently in vogue – "world-beat"—some of which is represented on Mary Jane Lamond's *Suas e!* (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

But she was reluctant to identify the line between traditional and non-traditional: "I'm not sure that I personally care about 'the line' as long as the culture is not intentionally misrepresented. And who am I to judge?" (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

Margo struggles to be accepted as a Gaelic singer not only because she is a Gaelic learner, but also because her surname is not Scottish. Wendy wondered if Margo had the same reaction to her singing when she sang English songs. Margo replied,

Never. Not in English. Not anywhere I've ever been. You can read reviews of other [Gaelic singers], whether they be from Scotland or Cape Breton, [and] there is a harshness. It's hard to be accepted in Cape Breton in Gaelic unless you're doing straight traditional. If you get reviews, just get all the old publications from anything ever written in the last fifty years and check it out, it's very interesting. It's not that they say, "Oh, you're terrible; it's the worst we ever heard." It's almost like you're transgressing. Especially if you've come from away.

Since it seems that Margo feels that these types of reactions are directed at her, she has likely felt considerable anxiety, particularly since she also feels a responsibility to Gaelic culture. She did not discuss how she balances her belief that she is helping Gaelic culture with her fear that she is somehow "transgressing" in the culture.

In spite of her efforts to promote Gaelic culture, Margo has some misgivings about the future of Gaelic in Cape Breton: "I don't know if you can keep it pure in Cape Breton the way that it has been, just because there's too many influences, like the funky music and everything else. [But] I don't think it will die." She went on to explain:

It's up to each and every person ... I think we all have our place. And we find our place when we take it seriously and do what we can. If we're the people that are taking it seriously, then we have to do our best to guard that—to hold that torch, to do what we can. I'm never going to be as fluent and as knowledgeable as Roddie C. I can't be. I just can't. I can only know what I know and I can only tell people what I don't know and where to find somebody who does know. Or, this is the direction they're going to get that. Or this is how it used to be. But this is what we do know. I can only be honest. I will not deceive anybody ... I don't like to think that it's on its way out. It just can't be isolated and pure. I don't think. But then again, I don't know.

Margo sees the guardianship of the Gaelic culture as a team effort, undertaken by a number of people, each with his/her own area of cultural expertise. With the decline of native Gaelic speakers, cultural knowledge has been splintered amongst numerous cultural learners.

Although the subject of puirt-a-beul was raised throughout the interview, Margo rarely focused her discussion on puirt-a-beul. She later explained: “Actually, I was surprised to be asked to be part of your study on puirt. It is not my area of expertise. It is difficult to focus one’s discussion on a subject one knows little about unless one is adept at B.S. I try to avoid that, if possible!” (personal communication, May 12, 1999). Instead, her answers indicated the importance of Gaelic song generally in her life, her teaching, and in Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Puirt-a-beul, however, constitute a significant part of Margo’s Gaelic song repertoire and her teaching methodology: “I have so very little first hand experience of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton. I *do* know, however, how well they work in helping students get their tongues around the Gaelic language” (personal communication, May 12, 1999). It became clear that Margo separates puirt-a-beul in the classroom from puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton Gaelic culture. She was quite concerned that I remember that she would never consider herself an authority on Cape Breton Gaelic culture:

It is of the utmost importance to please remember that I am not a Cape Bretoner. I am not a Cape Breton Gaelic speaker. There are those within the Cape Breton Gaelic community who resent me even though some of my work is helpful to the cause of preserving Gaelic. I have come to believe that “blood is thick and heads are even more so at times.” I try to ignore small mentalities and focus on larger issues. Each day I try to learn something new in Gaelic and pass it along. I am no authority. However, I am very conscientious and I do care! (personal communication, May 12, 1999).

5.5 Mary Jane Lamond

Many people know Mary Jane Lamond as a result of her vocal contributions to Ashley MacIsaac's "Sleepy Maggie" (1995). In addition to her work on MacIsaac's album, *Hi™ How Are You Today?*, Lamond has three albums to her own credit: *Bho Thìr nan Craobh* (From the Land of the Trees, c. 1994), *Suas E!* (Stand Up for It, 1997), and *Làn Dùil* (1999). The first, produced by B&R Heritage Enterprises of Iona (run by Brian and Rosemary McCormack), consists of traditional Gaelic songs sung in a relatively traditional manner, with the occasional acoustic instrumental back up added. The second, over which Lamond maintained control herself, has some "traditional" tracks and some decidedly pop-sounding tracks. The first single released from the album, "Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean," is a port-a-beul.

Through my Gaelic teacher and hearing "Sleepy Maggie" on the airwaves, I became aware of Mary Jane while still in Toronto. I have seen her in concert several times, in both Toronto and Cape Breton. Although her music impresses me, I was most strongly affected by Mary Jane's statements to a friend and colleague during an interview for a project on Celtic pop. When my friend mentioned my puirt-a-beul research, Mary Jane responded strongly:

That seems like such a small little part of the whole big picture. Like puirt-a-beul are kind of like, they're a little teeny, like whatever they are, and she can try and do her Ph.D., but nobody knows about puirt-a-beul, like there are people with double Ph.D.s have tried to research ... Well, it's interesting, but it's not like, it's nowhere near like, if you don't understand Gaelic poetry and the whole thing then you wouldn't really understand what we're talking about. Like it's, it's a kind of thing like, you have these big songs, like Duncan Dan MacIntyre songs, or like these big hunting songs, or these milling songs with like really good poetry that

have twenty-seven verses, and then you have these little songs that, a fiddle player like Joe Peter MacLean, from Cape Breton, his mother used to sing them to him when he was playing the fiddle to teach him ... Like I think you could do a paper if you were doing your B.A. or your M.A. You could do one paper on it. I don't think it warrants a thesis.

Having read this part of my friend's interview before I had been to Cape Breton, it both scared me and made me even more determined to understand puirt-a-beul. More importantly, it made me feel as though I stood in opposition to Mary Jane. Her statements coloured my understanding of the perception of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton, reinforcing comments made by FS (cf. Chapter 4). I believed that puirt-a-beul were a minor part of the culture and that most Gaelic speakers were indifferent to it. In my absence, Mary Jane was able to speak freely about her reactions to my research. Her statements had a profound impact on my expectations of Gaelic song in Cape Breton and how I planned my interviews (namely, what questions to ask). As a result of her international music career, her views are particularly important since she has had and continues to have an impact on the functions and roles of puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapter 6.4.f, g, and i).

Having introduced myself to her at a Gaelic "Song and Language" workshop held in Toronto at which she was the special guest, she invited me to arrange an interview with her in August, while I was in Cape Breton. Even with a busy touring and recording schedule she was very accommodating with her time. We arranged to meet at Tim Horton's in Port Hawkesbury on August 3, 1998.

Mary Jane impressed me as an intelligent woman and one used to being interviewed. She answered my questions fully and thoughtfully. She was quick to correct misinterpretations of her words; I had the impression that she has been misquoted more than once. I was taken aback by Mary Jane's apparent lack of interest in my ideas pertaining to puirt-a-beul; I had thought that she would be curious about my research. She did not seem to feel that I could augment her knowledge of puirt-a-beul. However, my reactions were only a result of the interference of my ego. My interview with Mary Jane was truly valuable, since she is both a Gaelic song researcher and Gaelic song performer. I was sorry—but not surprised—that she cut our interview short.

Mary Jane is not a native Cape Bretoner although her grandparents lived on the Mira River, a Gaelic-speaking area of the Island, and she visited them during her summer holidays. She heard Gaelic at those times and she eventually joined a Gaelic choir in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Later, she completed her B.A. in Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University, which included several years of Gaelic language study. Although she considered graduate work, she was asked to do a recording for B&R Heritage Enterprises while "Sleepy Maggie" became a chart-topping single. She decided to pursue a musical career. In any case, she felt that she was "too old now to get into that kind of debt and money and time. Maybe when I'm in my 50s or something like that."

Mary Jane gradually became involved in the recording industry. Someone from the Antigonish Gaelic choir arranged for her to sing at the popular Antigonish Highland Games. Others heard her and hired her to sing at various events. Brian and Rosemary

McCormack, of B&R Heritage Enterprises, became aware of her through Gaelic immersion programs and asked if she would be interested in recording Nova Scotian Gaelic songs:

And they wanted a younger singer, for learners and whatever. I mean I had no idea. And then it got nominated for 2 East Coast music awards. And at the same time, I had met Ashley at a concert, one of the local concerts in Antigonish. He asked if I would sing on a record he was working on independently and I asked if he would play on mine so that's where that came in. So it all just kind of happened completely by chance. I remember at the East Coast Music Awards that year, it was quite funny, because I sang on the show and, I mean, I had breakfast with the vice-president of Warner Music and he asked me what direction I wanted my music career to take and I was laughing. Muffin was coming out of my mouth. I was, like, "you can't make a career singing Gaelic songs." That's what I said.

Mary Jane recently bought a house in Cape Breton. She is now a fluent Gaelic speaker and is politically active on behalf of Gaelic culture in Nova Scotia. Even so, she is not particularly optimistic with respect to its future in Cape Breton:

It doesn't look very good. Sometimes I feel more positive than other times. I think there's more goodwill towards it than there used to be. There are absolutely no resources. But there are some encouraging things. The school, education departments in school boards in Cape Breton are starting to become more interested in them ... In some ways I feel positive because there is goodwill but there's not enough people working to make it happen and there aren't enough resources and it's very frustrating getting money. People have the impression that there's loads of money for this culture, that it's just going to sustain itself. And let's face it, there's no money in education these days anyway. Not enough. And it's scary. I find it really scary.

Regardless, Mary Jane continues as president of the Gaelic Council of Nova Scotia. She also helped create an educational program called Spors!, which toured elementary schools around Cape Breton's gaidhealtachd.

Considering Mary Jane's strong interest in, and work on behalf of, Cape Breton Gaelic culture, I questioned whether she felt she had a duty to record Gaelic songs:

I didn't feel like I had a duty at the beginning. I was interested and that's what I wanted to do ... So I feel a certain responsibility—not responsibility—I'm in debt, in a way, because I'm making a living—meagre, but I'm making a living—singing these songs. I think a lot of what I do at the Gaelic Council is because I care and because there's an intrinsic value in this culture which is not being recognized: the history of the marketing of the province and all these things that are too long and complicated to get into here. But I feel that a wrong is being done, that this [culture] is being allowed to die. So I feel like whatever influence I can bring to bear on it, I'm happy to do that. I want to [record Gaelic songs] and secondly that I feel like I should do it and that we have to give back. In the same way that I think the education system doesn't do this, I make sure that I do myself. This [culture] is not an endless resource. We have to develop [it] in a sustainable way. Whatever we take from this culture, we have to be putting something back in. The same way that if you were going to harvest a forest, you would replant. So that's the reason why I feel like I have a responsibility. And at this point, I don't always want that responsibility. I have to also remind myself that the whole fate of Gaelic does not rest on my shoulders. Because you begin to feel like that sometimes and sometimes you're made to feel that way a little bit because there's so few people learning.

Mary Jane's second album, *Suas E!*, contains a number of songs from the St. Francis Xavier University Gaelic Folklore Project, collected by Dr. John Shaw. She recorded songs that were once in general usage but which are now no longer heard performed. In fact, according to another consultant, one song, "Seinn o horo seinn" (Sing, o sing), was reintroduced to current Gaelic song repertoire because of her recording. It was sung at several different milling frolics during the summer of 1998.

We began by discussing puirt-a-beul, and Mary Jane had some decidedly firm opinions on the subject. She explained how puirt-a-beul are perceived by Gaelic speakers:

[Native Gaelic speakers] will kind of sing it and then laugh. [Puirt-a-beul] are not serious forms of music the way other poetry is or the way other songs are, even the way the tunes themselves are ... The couple of fiddle players I've asked about puirt-a-beul, they used to say their mother or their grandmother would sing them to them when they were learning the fiddle. So it would be a way of transmitting the tunes. And they're kind of fun. They're almost like riddles, in a way: they're so difficult to pronounce until you get in the rhythm of them so I think that's part of it too. They're sort of show-offy little pieces, like a tongue-twister. I think they're sort of like that so they're quite light. There's certainly not anything serious about them at all and that's indicated in the lyrics themselves ... They're not considered really serious forms of music and they're the kinds of things that people start with—like kids will start with or whatever—and there are a lot of people who come to Gaelic stuff and all they want to learn is things like that. I know that's not what you're doing and you're taking Gaelic and so on but they just want to learn these because they're fun or they've heard The Rankins [The Rankin Family] sing them or things like that and so you get a little bit jaded when people want to take that approach to Gaelic when you know that there's so much more and that it's almost like an insult to the Gaelic tradition if that's the only thing you're—You know what I mean?

There are several points to consider. While indicating that many puirt-a-beul were learned from women (mothers and grandmothers), Mary Jane associated with children. While Mary Jane argued that puirt-a-beul are the types of songs children and language learners might learn, she also described them as a means of transmitting fiddle tunes. Mary Jane described them as a “light” genre because they are “show-offy” like tongue twisters, which makes them fun. Mary Jane does not consider them “heavy” songs because their lyrics are not poetically serious. Because they are musically fun and lyrically undemanding, Mary Jane believes that they attract new people to the culture. At the same time, she fears that these same people will not look beyond puirt-a-beul. She fears that people will think puirt-a-beul symbolize or encapsulate all of Gaelic culture, resulting in a skewed, superficial understanding of it.

If puirt-a-beul are part of children's lore rather than adults' and if they are indeed viewed ambivalently by native Gaelic speakers, why are they so popular in Scotland? Mary Jane explained, "They're more of a Scottish thing in a way. Although they were popular here in a way, they've kind of taken off in Scotland. They were kept alive by the Mòd. And by the choirs. So, for a while here, they were not completely out of touch, but they were not very well known except for a few of them." Because the Scottish Mòd has a puirt-a-beul category, Mary Jane feels that they were legitimized in Scotland. Although she professed not to have a theory of the origins of puirt-a-beul, she mused:

I guess it was something that people just did as part of the music. But I don't think it was a big deal. Nobody was a champion puirt-a-beul singer until the Mòd in Scotland. And that's really drawn a lot of attention to puirt-a-beul.

The Mòd stipulates which repertoire is to be used in each category and publishes the appropriate music. Competitions are for not only solo performers but also for choirs. Therefore, the Mòd has published puirt-a-beul repertoire in two- and four-part harmony. Some Gaelic choirs in Cape Breton use Mòd-published music, since Gaelic choir music is not readily available.

At the same time, Mary Jane indicated that puirt-a-beul were once popular in Cape Breton. Asked why she felt they had lost their popularity there, she explained:

Well, I mean, why did a lot of things fade out? A lot of things that are no longer in use ... People aren't teaching their children in the same way either. Plus, Gaelic wasn't being spoken at home and puirt-a-beul and spinning songs and lullabies, those are domestic kinds of things. Like puirt-a-beul wasn't something that was performed. It wasn't part of a big social thing like milling songs were. Or like bigger poetry which might've been performed in concert or just in the home. Like, say people would gather together for a ceilidh, I don't think someone would sing puirt-a-beul except maybe they might sing one or two and someone might

give a couple of steps. So it wasn't something like people heard over and over again. And once people stopped speaking Gaelic to children, why would they sing them Gaelic songs? Do you know what I mean? I guess they just fell out of use the same way that a lot of smaller domestic things did.

Mary Jane also noted that “Probably nobody would think to offer them [to a collector]. If someone was coming to record a Gaelic singer, they might not think to sing a port-a-beul because they were not that important in terms of their idea of the tradition. And passing things on.” Mary Jane believed that there might be no trace of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton at this point in time if it hadn't been for collectors such as John Shaw, who appears to have made specific requests for puirt-a-beul.

Mary Jane was the most explicit of all my consultants with respect to how puirt-a-beul might be gendered. After she mentioned that some people had told her they had learned them from their grandmothers, I asked her whether or not most puirt-a-beul were learned from women:

Not a lot of people. I wouldn't—see, the danger—I'm just trying to be really clear. There really aren't that many people who have puirt-a-beul. I'm talking about two or three people, maybe. And this is so my own observations. I wouldn't want you to draw any conclusions from that at all. [But] yeah, I'd say they were probably used to teach too. And I've heard people say, over in Inverness County, I've heard people say that they danced to them. People would sing and somebody would dance.

For the first time, Mary Jane tied puirt-a-beul to dance. Asked if she believed that puirt-a-beul were meant to accompany dance, she elucidated:

I think they were meant totally as fun, like tongue twisters, and kind of as a way of making faster tunes. I betcha they probably were. Why else would they do it, in a way? I think probably they were. You can picture that, you know. You could picture people at a party and somebody just diddling a tune and somebody

else getting up and dancing and all in complete silliness and fun and not at all, not a bit of seriousness to it.

Mary Jane went on to reiterate how puirt-a-beul were used to teach fiddle tunes and how they were sung by women of the house. But for all that Mary Jane downplayed the connection between dancing and puirt-a-beul, she included the sounds of step dancing on “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” from *Suas E!* Asked why she had drawn such a distinct connection, she replied:

Why? Because it’s dance music. I mean it definitely is. Particularly in this context. ‘Cause you hear that tune at square dances all the time so it seemed like a logical connection to me. It definitely is dance music.

Mary Jane mentioned that “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” is heard at square dances, meaning that fiddles play the equivalent instrumental tune for the purpose of dancing. There are numerous fiddle tunes in Cape Breton that have Gaelic lyrics. Some fiddlers are aware of the words and some are not.

Anyone who has heard “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” would be unlikely to categorize it as a “traditional” rendition of the tune. Not only has Mary Jane altered the tune in various ways, but there is also an instrumental accompaniment (rhythm and electric guitars, fiddle, and drums) and studio effects have been employed. Because Mary Jane is so involved in traditional Gaelic culture, I was curious how she balanced her love of “traditional” Gaelic song with Gaelic pop:

That whole record [*Suas E!*] is meant to be an exploration of where will I sit in the world. On the one hand, I’m involved in this tradition, the song tradition where nothing changes. Not that nothing changes but what’s prized the most is that you have this the same way someone had it three generations ago and then, on the other hand, we’re growing up in a world, I’m working in a world where

what's prized is innovation. So you have this dichotomy going on that you have to bridge, even as a person. And I think that all of us below a certain age are dealing with that. Some people are really just traditionalists and I just don't happen to be. I love this tradition. I have a great deal of respect for it. But for me the question was, can it be done to put modern instruments with this and still be respectful of the songs and not ruin them? And it's a challenge. But I don't feel that people hate what I do. I don't think they hate what I do. Some other people will come and say that they really enjoy it. They enjoyed it. It's not like I have a big rock band or anything, you know? It's fairly textural, I think, and that sort of thing.

She noted that there is a split in her audience. Traditionalists might only listen to certain tracks on her second album or prefer her first album altogether. Other people might avoid the "traditional" tracks in favour of the pop-oriented tracks. She noted that a popular local radio station, CJFX in Antigonish, has only played traditional selections from her albums.

While Mary Jane was aware that certain people choose to listen to her traditional tracks because they do not believe in her "popification" of traditional Gaelic songs, she also believed that:

The other thing about this whole thing is that, really, a large part of learning these songs and being able to do what I do has to do with the fact that I've involved myself in this community of people, whatever the greater Gaelic community—like, just going to Gaelic events and that kind of thing. And I think that's given me a perspective on it as well having done a degree but I mean, to me, it was because I immersed myself in that ... So that's also given me a different relationship, I think, to them. In some ways, they're also not as free to make comments on what I do because they know me personally and they know that I've done a lot of stuff for the Gaelic Council and I really believe in promoting Gaelic. So, I think whatever they feel about the arrangements on the record, they also realize that I'm doing a lot, as much as I can. Probably it's not enough and it's probably not a lot for Gaelic. I don't know. You must know better than I do. I don't walk up to people and ask them what they think about what I did. Because I don't want to know the answer.

Aware that people might disagree with her arrangements, she still hopes that the work she does on behalf of traditional Gaelic culture demonstrates that she has the culture's best interests at heart.

Interestingly, Mary Jane felt that she is more popular outside of Cape Breton, in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, than she is within the *gaidhealtachd* from which she draws her songs:

One time a year I'll do a concert in Cape Breton and not even every year. And particularly what I do, there's less demand. I get less work than any of those people that you mentioned [The Barra MacNeils, The Rankin Family, and Ashley MacIsaac] and I don't know what it is. There's a lot of different feelings towards Gaelic. Some people are kind of resentful or afraid of it and some people don't want to be challenged. All they want to do is be—particularly with the music here and the fiddle reigning supreme so much, people just want to be whipped into a frenzy all the time. And I don't do that, I don't think. There are some upbeat numbers in the show and that kind of thing but it's not about polka-ing to fiddle music. People don't get into it as much here. It was much more readily accepted, right from the beginning—Toronto and Vancouver and Edmonton and Calgary have all been much more accepting of what I do than anybody in Nova Scotia ... Either I'm really bad and really boring or it's just not the kind of thing that people want. What I do works better in a theatre, much better in a soft-seat theatre. It's the kind of music you really have to listen to, Gaelic songs. It's just not outdoor concert kind of stuff.

Notwithstanding where her songs are most popular, it is clear that Mary Jane Lamond exerts power over Scots Gaelic in Canada. Whether she is in Cape Breton touring with an educational Gaelic group or touring Canada to promote her latest album, she has the ability to influence the direction of Gaelic culture in this country. No matter how much Mary Jane may consider *puirt-a-beul* negligible, her performance of them at concerts and her inclusion of them on her albums suggest to her audiences that *puirt-a-beul* are in fact quite worthy of attention.

5.6 Janet Buchanan

Janet was born and raised in Cape Breton. She appears to be in her early 30s and currently works full-time. She rents a large, old farmhouse in Jersey Cove, about a 20-minute drive from the Gaelic College in St. Ann's and a 30-minute drive to Baddeck, a major Cape Breton town.

She first got involved in Gaelic song when Bonnie Thompson heard her sing at a party and asked if she would be interested in joining the local Gaelic choir. Although Janet was interested and was a member of the choir for approximately two years, she quit out of frustration: "And I just—I was stumbling, I was struggling, I wasn't understanding, I wasn't—I just felt lost, I was over my head. And I gave it up." Then, for a reason Janet no longer remembers, she returned to the choir about seven years ago. She told me,

This time, for some reason—maybe it was because my age difference, maybe I had grown enough or matured enough It wasn't as much of a hurdle for me anymore. I could piece more of it together and it was getting a little easier to understand the songs. And I thought, "Hm, maybe this isn't as hard." Because the first time I had been in the choir I had thought, "I'll never get this! This is impossible, I'm just going to give up." But then this time, it just felt different. It felt like, maybe I can do this. Maybe it is something I am meant to do. So I started that again.

She met Michelle Smith in the choir and Michelle, Bonnie, and Janet formed a trio. They sang various types of Gaelic songs at Gaelic society meetings and they were even asked to sing on both of Mary Jane Lamond's albums. On *Bho Thir nan Croabh*, the trio accompanied Mary Jane on "Domhnaill Antaidh" ("Donald 'Antaidh'"), "He Mo Leannan" ("Hey My Love"), "Cha Bhi Mi Buan" ("I'll Not Survive"), and "Dh'Òlainn

Deoch a Làimh Mo Rùin” (“I Would Take a Drink from My Love’s Hands”), all milling songs. On *Suas E!*, Janet can be heard in the choruses of “Tha Mo Rùn air a’ Ghille” (“I Love the Lad”), and “Òran do Ghille a Chaidh a Bhàrthadh” (“On the Drowning of a Young Man”), again both milling songs.

I first saw Janet singing with Michelle and Bonnie at a concert in July 1998 sponsored by the Christmas Island Feis, a major annual Gaelic cultural event. The trio sang a set of four puirt-a-beul. No one had mentioned Janet to me previously and yet here was someone with a good voice, obviously taking pleasure in singing the type of music I was in Cape Breton to study. I introduced myself to Janet afterwards, suggesting that an interview with her could be very helpful to my research. Our quick conversation revealed that Janet had a particular interest in puirt-a-beul. She was easy to talk to and she offered her phone number. But it was not until late August when we were finally able to meet again. Janet returned to Christmas Island to see Mary Jane Lamond’s concert there. I was surprised that she invited me to return to her home for the night, a one and a half hour drive away. Since we did not arrive until late that night, we began our interview the following morning. Unfortunately, her parents called and required her for personal reasons. Our interview was therefore shorter than I would have liked. However, I was still able to ask her some questions about puirt-a-beul.

Janet sings puirt-a-beul because:

They’re fun. They’re fun to do. And there’s not much to memorize in them; they’re pretty short. You can have fun with them. I find though they’re difficult to do. I think maybe that’s why too: the challenge of trying to do them. I’m

never really sure if I'm doing them right, I'm never sure if I've got the right speed on them but people always enjoy it so I figure, why not?

When I asked her what is challenging about puirt-a-beul, she told me that

They don't give you much room to breathe. Nowadays, you'll hear the recorded versions, they've got the instruments with them and they'll take a break and the instruments will play and they get to breathe. That's great. But when you don't have an instrument—and it's not meant to be played with an instrument—if you don't have that, you don't have the luxury of stopping. You've just gotta keep going, keep the beat. The most important thing is the beat. The words are most times just gibberish, like you know. They're senseless, don't mean too much but the tune's got to be held. That makes it difficult. The most I've been able to do so far is four, like four together in one set. Like the night of the church [the concert at which I met Janet]. And I find if I start them out too fast, then I know I'm screwed: I've started them too fast and I haven't given myself enough time to breathe and I just don't feel like I've done what I should with it.

Although Janet is a Gaelic learner of eight years, she did not mention language as a barrier. I asked her how she learns her Gaelic songs in general. She learns the tune by ear, either from someone in person, such as Bonnie, or from a recording. She prefers to have the words written down, which she then reads repeatedly, usually with Bonnie's guidance, until she is familiar with them. And “then I just sing it until I'm comfortable with it. And I memorize it.” Because Janet often has a limited time in which to prepare a vocal performance, she will not necessarily learn the meanings of the words immediately. She did say that she tries to return to them when she is less pressured in order to understand the lyrics she sings.

Janet told me that she prefers to sing local songs. She has therefore learned songs (other than puirt-a-beul) at the suggestion of her native Gaelic-speaking grandmother. It appears that Janet conceives of Gaelic song as a link to her family, her heritage and her

community. She wants to sing the songs her relatives sang in the past even though Gaelic is not her own language. At the same time, she told me that she had learned her puirt-a-beul from Catriona Parsons (a Scottish immigrant), from recordings by The Barra MacNeils (who, although a Cape Breton group, learned their puirt-a-beul repertoire from Catriona Parsons and Rosemary McCormack, another Scottish immigrant), and from various other Cape Breton and Scottish recordings. She would like to expand her puirt-a-beul repertoire, but she struggles to find local people who can teach them to her, forcing her to resort to recordings. Janet is thus caught in a conflict in which she claims to want to sing local songs, but actually sings songs from outside the area.

Janet chooses puirt-a-beul repertoire based on whether she likes the *tune*: “I don’t pick a port-a-beul I don’t like the tune of. I have some I’ll hear and I’ll think, ‘No, I don’t like that one.’ Or I’ll hear another one: ‘Oh yeah, I like that one.’” This focus on the melody is linked to Janet’s definition of puirt-a-beul, which she believes evolved from instrumental tunes needing to be preserved vocally during the Highland Presbyterian censure of dance and dance music in the nineteenth century:

Well, what I think is that in Scotland, there was incredible amount of power given to the church and one day, the priest—minister, whoever—told them these instruments were the work of the devil, for them to go home and burn them, to never pick up another instrument, to never dance. If you did, you were pretty much worshipping the devil. And a lot of these God-fearing people went home, took their instruments, destroyed them, but I think there were a few of the people who thought, “I don’t know if this is the end all and be all of what we should do here.” So they created the mouth music so they could preserve the tunes, so the tunes wouldn’t be lost forever. Which I’m—[It’s an] incredible thrill that somebody had the guts to stand up and say, “We can’t let this die because if we do, this is it. It’s gone. It’s over.” So that they kept them alive. And I’m amazed that... When you pass something through word of mouth, it tends to get mixed up

and garbled up and changed. And I'm amazed they've stayed as true as they have. It's amazing. But it's nice.

Janet's belief that puirt-a-beul originated with instrumental tunes led her to accompany some young highland dancers with puirt-a-beul. I asked her if she had ever accompanied dancing with puirt-a-beul and she replied,

Oddly enough, we did and it was oddly enough, not step dancers. Highland dancers. We had a MacInnes family reunion. ... And there were two young girls there who were going to dance with us. And for some reason—oh, we were doing a milling frolic demonstration that night for them so Bonnie was there with me. And we were getting ready. And they had forgotten their music. And they were just almost in tears. They were so disappointed they couldn't do this. Bonnie and I got together and I said, "You know, Bon, do you think we could do enough puirt-a-beul to let them dance a little bit so they wouldn't be heart-broken?" So we thought, "Well, we'll try it." So we got the girls together and we went off in a little corner and we said, "OK, can you dance to this?" And we sang a couple and well, they didn't know. But they'd try it. So that was fine, they tried it. And it worked out beautiful.

Although Janet believes that puirt-a-beul are designed to accompany Cape Breton step dancing, she was unafraid to use them in a different context. She understood that puirt-a-beul were instrumental tunes vocalized. Therefore, she did not have a problem using puirt-a-beul in the place of instrumental music. Note, however, that Janet and Bonnie sang puirt-a-beul together, rather than as an a cappella solo.

In conclusion, puirt-a-beul are often a social experience for Janet, as she frequently learns and performs them in the company of others. She performs them publicly and considers them to function primarily as tunes rather than as songs. She finds puirt-a-beul both amusing and challenging on a musical, phonetic (rather than semantic) level. Janet is drawn to particular puirt-a-beul based on aesthetic considerations. Despite

having difficulty learning the Gaelic language, she persists in singing Gaelic songs (preferably local), suggesting that Gaelic song offers a link to a community with which she would like to be associated. The conflicts apparent in Janet's musical life are likely a result of Janet being caught between what she likes personally and what she believes is expected of her as a singer in the larger Gaelic community.

5.7 **Catriona Parsons**

I had occasion to meet Catriona many times while I was in Cape Breton. She taught a summer Gaelic choir at the St. Ann's Gaelic College on Wednesday nights, which I attended for a few weeks. However, I did not continue because it conflicted with Gaelic language classes, which I felt were important to take. However, I saw the choir perform several times and I also took several Gaelic song workshops with Catriona through the summer. Some were offered through the Gaelic College, and some were offered through the Christmas Island *Feis* (Festival). Several workshops centred on *puirt-a-beul*. In addition, I undertook the Gaelic immersion week at the Gaelic College where Catriona was my teacher.

Catriona is originally from the Isle of Lewis in Scotland. Although Gaelic is her first language, she did graduate work in English and theoretical linguistics at the University of Edinburgh. She met her American husband, who was studying to be a Lutheran minister, at the university. The couple moved to the States, where Catriona taught in the Department of English and linguistics at Dartmouth University. One student

discovered Catriona's background and requested Gaelic lessons. On the strength of those lessons, he went on to get a PhD in Celtic Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Those lessons were the first time Catriona taught her own native language.

She later went on to direct a Gaelic choir consisting of Gaelic learners. She took them to Mòd Ontario in Toronto, where they won the trophy. They were the first group from the U.S. to compete there. Catriona had not considered leaving her work as an English professor but she reflected that

I suppose I had a sense of unease or unrest. I mean, English is all very well but it wasn't my mother tongue. And also I was at the time, and again almost half consciously, I was writing a little bit in Gaelic. Some poetry and that sort of thing. So I guess I must have been really wanting to be more fully involved.

She and her husband took their second holiday in Cape Breton in 1978. They visited the Gaelic College and met the Gaelic instructor, Tina Morrison. Tina was overwhelmed with the amount of teaching she was expected to do so after she got to know Catriona, she and the college director asked Catriona to teach summer Gaelic courses. Catriona has been there every summer since then except for one. Tina has since passed away. Catriona was invited to teach courses in the Celtic Studies department at St. Francis Xavier University in 1993. At that time, she and her husband moved to Cape Breton permanently.

Catriona is very active in the Gaelic community. She teaches local song workshops regularly. She also organizes the Gaelic College's annual Mòd. She has strong ties with *Comunn Gaidhlig Americaigh* [American Gaelic Society]. She has adjudicated in many of their annual Mòds, which she helped to establish. She

occasionally writes a Gaelic article for their magazine. In addition, rather than promote Scottish Gaelic culture, she has attempted to promote Cape Breton Gaelic culture since she feels that it has been largely neglected as a Gaelic resource. She told me that,

One of the things that I am proud of is that this group, *An Comunn Gaidhlig Americaigh*, has begun to look very much towards Cape Breton over time. Certainly, there's the Highland Society in Scotland and *An Comunn Gaidhlig Americaigh* sends part of its dues there but then they began to think, "Well, we can send part of our dues to help situations in Cape Breton." When Rosemary McCormack had her Gaelic nursery school [in Iona], they sent money to help her. They also more than once sent money to the Gaelic College that was a scholarship for an American student who would come I've tried to, when I meet people there who are interested in Gaelic, to tell them about Cape Breton.

Catriona is therefore involved in various aspects of Gaelic culture, but she especially loves teaching. Although she regularly teaches adults and university-aged students, she told me that she particularly enjoys teaching little children. She explained:

I love teaching period and I love teaching adults, that's fine. But when you teach young children, there's something special. Especially, you know, 5, 6, 7, 8 [years old], before somebody has said, "Well, why are you doing that? It's not..." Because they have such delight and they learn so readily. And it is rather nice to find [*snaps her fingers*] there it is. They can say it.... They have such a facility but they delight in little poems and songs and all of that. So I really love teaching the little ones as well, kids.

Although Catriona teaches many language courses, she also teaches Gaelic songs.

Catriona mentioned that "I feel my purpose is to teach the language and certainly one would use many songs and whatever helps there are." Catriona identifies songs as a pedagogical tool. Although she suggests that there are other "helps" or pedagogical tools that she would employ in her teaching, songs are the only "help" she identifies by name. Songs appear to be important to the acquisition and even understanding of the language.

Catriona explained how she first started singing:

From a very, very, very early age, I was singing. I learned things from my father. My father would sing little songs and tell me the words and teach me the words and I would learn the words when I was quite small. My mother had favourite songs too and she would sing those to me. And in school, we always had—there was always a teacher who knew Gaelic and who wanted to pass on songs. So I began singing at the local Mòd at a very early age. The Lewis Provincial Mòd. And getting prizes and that sort of thing. And kept that up growing up. And sang at various national Mòds from time to time as well. And sang in choirs as well. So I've always been singing, I guess, one way or another. And used to sing at ceilidhs in the Stornoway Town Hall and all that.

Catriona's situation is quite different from that of most native Gaelic speakers in Cape Breton. Most Gaelic singers with whom I spoke had never been "taught" songs; they learned songs by hearing them during visits and "ceilidhs." Additionally, the Mòd was not strong in Cape Breton and therefore none of the Gaelic speakers with whom I spoke had competed in one. Nor did any mention having been involved with choirs. Finally, many of the older Gaelic speakers with whom I spoke had not been taught Gaelic by their Gaelic-speaking parents because their parents felt that English was a more useful language.

Although Catriona's first language was Gaelic, she told me how she learned English: "When I was a child, one was bilingual immediately, essentially because the English was very strong. Although, at the time, certainly Gaelic was very strong in homes and communities. One spoke Gaelic at home and on the playground and that sort of thing." However, Catriona had more opportunity than most of her peers to be immersed in Gaelic because she spent a lot of time with her grandparents, one of whom

was a monoglot Gaelic-speaker. Catriona reminisced about her time with her grandparents:

But what really influenced me perhaps more than anything else was that I loved being with my grandparents, my father's parents. And every single Saturday, even when I was little kid about this high, my father would take me to the bus. I would go on the bus down to Aignis. My grandfather would meet me at the bus stop there. You know, this sort of thing. I just loved being with them. And I spent all my summer holidays with them, all seven weeks anyway of the summer. And of course, we didn't speak anything but Gaelic there. And my grandmother was of the last generation, really, that had little or no English. She did have a word or two, I remember.

Although Catriona's grandmother never sang, her grandfather sang during evening worship, when he would present the psalms.

Asked to talk about her singing experiences as she grew up and how she actually learned her songs, she explained:

[I] learned them, essentially, by listening to the teacher. Whoever it was: my father, schoolteacher would sing the song, go over the words, sing the verses and the tunes until one would get them and—not from a book, never with piano accompaniment or never with picking out the tune on the piano. It was never like that. It was one on one. The teacher would sing and go over it all: words and tune. So one did get a flavour then of different styles and so on from different teachers from year to year. One of my teachers in high school was Anna Sheumais (Anna MacKenzie)... From her I got milling songs because she had a milling group [made up] of high school students and she would put us through our milling paces. And she was one of the music teachers, you see. And she would be teaching us, essentially, those traditional songs and taking us to a milling. Not in the sense of a real milling, exactly, but showing us how it was done, putting us through our paces as to how to do it, the lead singer, the measuring of the cloth, then the folding of it afterwards with the clapping songs that would've been sung. And so I have songs from her. They're not all milling songs; she had other songs as well, including children's songs like dandling songs and that kind of thing. Some puirt-a-beul as well.

Again, Catriona's experience is very different from that of people in Cape Breton. She had music teachers who taught her Gaelic songs, an experience not echoed by my Cape Breton consultants. Catriona experienced milling songs/frolics as part of her education. She was formally taught all the elements of a milling frolic. In Cape Breton, on the other hand, one learns by attending the frolics; there are no milling frolic classes or official milling frolic groups.

It is worth noting that Catriona juxtaposes children's songs, or "dandling" songs, with puirt-a-beul. Clearly, Catriona does not conceive of puirt-a-beul as the same as children's songs. She lists each as a separate category.

Catriona went on to stipulate the source of all her puirt-a-beul:

All the puirt-a-beul that I know, are essentially old country puirt-a-beul. They're puirt-a-beul I brought with me. I frankly haven't picked up any puirt-a-beul here except one or two, like *Am Muilean Dubh*, which I just didn't happen to know in the old country—it wasn't one we sang in Lewis anyway, *Am Muilean Dubh*—and yet, of course, it is an old-country piece. But very popular, as you know, here. And so I picked up the words quickly. So even although it's popular here, it's an old country port-a-beul. So all the puirt-a-beul I know, I brought with me, essentially. And it's true that there are some puirt-a-beul here and they're trying, I guess, to increase that repertoire.

Catriona is of the opinion that puirt-a-beul are no longer being composed and that all puirt-a-beul were composed in Scotland and then brought over to Cape Breton. She believes that the puirt-a-beul canon is fixed.

It is particularly interesting to observe how Catriona almost apologizes for the fact that all of her puirt-a-beul repertoire originated in Scotland. It is as though she is aware that she is introducing foreign song repertoire to Cape Breton. At the same time, much of

the Cape Breton Gaelic song repertoire *did* originate in Scotland. There seems to be a general understanding amongst Gaelic-speakers that Cape Breton Gaelic songs had to have been brought to Cape Breton at the time of the Clearances in the mid 19th century in order to be considered legitimate Cape Breton Gaelic songs. Any Gaelic songs brought to Cape Breton since then, particularly in the last few decades, are suddenly “foreign” and not indigenous to the island.

Finally, Catriona suggests that Cape Bretoners are attempting to revive puirt-a-beul. But she seems uncertain that this is indeed the case. However, if they are trying to increase the repertoire, then Catriona’s old-country puirt-a-beul contributions would be more acceptable.

Catriona suggested how one might learn more about puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton:

I would really listen to the fiddle tunes and then I would find out if there were Gaelic words to them. You know, the very popular ones, the ones that clearly have been in the repertoire all the way up. In which case, they would’ve been sung at one time. They had to have been sung because the way the fiddlers learned them was to hear people sing them. You know that, of course. So they had to have been sung. I mean “*Ciamar a ni mi a dannsadh direach*,” for example, that’s a tune—all the fiddlers can play that tune. I’m sure they must have sung it. Whether it’s precisely the old-country words, of course, is another matter. But it seems to me that the traditional fiddle tunes, finding out what they are and seeing, in fact, if there are words—maybe they’re not in the folk memory here but maybe there are words from the old country that might have been [sung here at one time].

Catriona’s understanding of puirt-a-beul, based on what she has been told by older fiddlers, is that they were at one time used to teach fiddle tunes (personal correspondence, May 1999). As a result, she believes that every fiddle tune played in Cape Breton, which is known to have corresponding Gaelic lyrics, was likely originally taught by means of

puirt-a-beul. She seems to suggest that this transmission of fiddle tunes by means of puirt-a-beul might have happened in Cape Breton, rather than in Scotland prior to emigration. So long as the tune and words exist in Scotland, and so long as the tune is played in Cape Breton, Catriona suggests that a connection may be made.

Noting that she seems to really enjoy puirt-a-beul, Catriona readily admitted that she did:

They're fun. I also like, though, the slow, sad ones [Gaelic songs]. But sure, puirt-a-beul are wonderful. They're fun, they're clearly heavily rhythmic; you can dance to them. I love the way the language is manipulated in some of them where you get the assonances and internal rhymes and all that kind of thing. But all Gaelic songs do that. It's just that it's "hotted up" in the puirt-a-beul and so it's just fun. Yeah, I love it, love it.

Catriona considers puirt-a-beul "fun" or entertaining, rather than insightful, or serious in any other fashion. However, she does note that puirt-a-beul can have sophisticated structures, involving poetic features used in other, more "serious" Gaelic song genres. She highlights the rhythm of puirt-a-beul, rather than their tunes, and associates the strong rhythm with dance.

She believes that puirt-a-beul have very old origins. She told me:

I know that there is a common belief that puirt-a-beul only really came into being after traditional Gaelic instruments were proscribed and then the songs were sung instead. But I'm sure puirt-a-beul have been sung from the beginning of Celtic society, because of the dual nature of the slower, more melancholic kind of song that is full of longing and at the same time, this immense instinctive desire to dance and do music that is this joyful, fun. So I'm sure it's been around always. I'm sure it has. It had to be, it had to be.

In other words, Catriona feels that people have always felt the impulse to dance, even before instruments were invented. Therefore, some sort of vocalized dance music would

have been used to accompany movement. Although Catriona did not state so explicitly, perhaps she believes that fiddle and bagpipe tunes evolved out of already established puirt-a-beul.

Asked if she felt that Cape Bretoners shared her positive attitude towards puirt-a-beul, Catriona replied,

Well, except for fiddlers themselves who are interested in their tunes, they [Cape Bretoners] are not interested so much in their words. I haven't noticed an enormous interest in puirt-a-beul even up until the present time as far as it goes. It is true that people who listen to fiddle music seem to listen interminably to reels and jigs but again, without benefit of words or even thinking about the fact that there were words, or there might be words behind all of this and that sort of thing. There is somewhat more interest, I think, perhaps. But that might be due to the fact that there have been more workshops in puirt-a-beul. Certainly, at Feis an Eilein [in Christmas Island], I've done puirt-a-beul workshops in the past and I've had nine or ten [people] there but last week or whenever it was, there were 23 or 24 so I mean, OK. But Feis an Eilein is growing in terms of people coming to it and therefore whatever is going on at it is bound to benefit in terms of numbers. Mary Jane clearly was interested in puirt-a-beul as well as milling songs and she's carried those onto her tapes and CDs as well. But in terms of real interest in finding out the words to those wonderful jigs and reels, I'm not sure that it has—you know, it may just be at the beginning of something, I don't know. But no doubt people who like to sing are ultimately going to learn more of those as well.

First, Catriona believes that fiddlers in particular—rather than singers—take an interest in puirt-a-beul presumably because the Gaelic lyrics could affect the manner in which the tune is played (cf. John Shaw 1992/1993) and also because they may function as mnemonic devices. She seems surprised that people would prefer to hear dance tunes played on the fiddle (specifically, jigs, reels, and strathspeys) and would not be interested in the corresponding songs. Nevertheless, she does note that her puirt-a-beul workshops are witnessing increased popularity. However, she does not account for the fact that a

number of those who attend these workshops are from outside of Cape Breton. It may be wrong to conclude that the increasing attendance at puirt-a-beul workshops indicates a greater acceptance of puirt-a-beul in the immediate Cape Breton locale.

Catriona suggests Mary Jane Lamond's inclusion of puirt-a-beul on her CDs indicates a growing Cape Breton awareness of—and interest in—puirt-a-beul. She does not say whether she believes Mary Jane Lamond's choice of repertoire might *influence* musical taste, or whether it is a *result* of musical taste in Cape Breton. Catriona does note, however, that puirt-a-beul are still attracting an audience and that the popularity of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton may still increase over time.

Catriona presumes that Gaelic singers will inevitably come across puirt-a-beul. She seems to suggest that however unpopular puirt-a-beul may be, it is a part of Cape Breton Gaelic song culture and must therefore be learned and/or understood, whether or not one might choose to embrace it.

Since Catriona had acknowledged that puirt-a-beul were not particularly popular in Cape Breton, I asked her why she felt puirt-a-beul have not been maintained until recently. She answered,

Well, the milling songs are sort of the *pièce de résistance* of Gaelic song in Cape Breton. Milling songs are, I think, ultimately what people who have Gaelic tend to enjoy most and tend to want to sing most. I don't know, partly perhaps because they can do it in a more social setting altogether. You know there's that element. Also people who do know them tend to know them really well and quite a number of them so you have the different exponents. You know, the different sort of champions of various ones and various forms of them—you can learn them readily, you can sing the chorus readily if somebody else sings the verse. And frankly, they are easier to sing than puirt-a-beul. Doing a jig or a reel really well is more difficult than doing a rhythmical milling song. And so even the choruses

of milling songs, with their vocables or whatever might be in them, somehow—I don't know whether it has to do with a kind of hypnotic, rhythmic quality. [Some are] easy. Some of them are hard. But a good number of them, anybody can join in and sing readily. I don't know. They just love their milling songs. They love their milling songs. It's become quite a thing to acquire them and learn them and pass them on. Maybe the energy of the puirt-a-beul went into the fiddle music and because, in fact, it was more difficult to sing really well, the faster rhythms of the puirt-a-beul. It's only a conjecture anyway.

Catriona suggests that milling songs dominate Cape Breton Gaelic song repertoire at the expense of other Gaelic song genres. She also believes that milling songs are easier to sing than puirt-a-beul which may explain why Cape Bretoners avoid puirt-a-beul.

Catriona believes that milling songs are easy to sing both because of their regular rhythm and the fact that the choruses are generally easy to learn, particularly if they consist of vocables. In part, Catriona attributes the popularity of certain song genres to language competence rather than musical, rhythmic, or other types of competencies.

Catriona also ponders whether the puirt-a-beul idiom became the domain of fiddlers, who obviously play, rather than sing. Presumably, the fiddler has used (and perhaps still uses) puirt-a-beul in order to learn a fiddle tune “correctly.” In this way puirt-a-beul were important, but were not sung publicly. As occasions to sing milling songs continued to exist, people inevitably learned milling songs. Meanwhile, there were few opportunities to sing puirt-a-beul for an audience so singers did not bother to learn them.

Asked to explain the difficulties of singing puirt-a-beul, Catriona clarified,

Well, some of the puirt-a-beul have structures where the sounds of the words themselves are difficult to make quickly in conjunction with each other so that—I mean, like, “*Cailleach Liath Ratharsaigh*” [The Old, Gray-Haired Woman from

Ratharsaigh] for example, clearly you have to be able to get your tongue very well around those words to sound them out quickly and properly and with breath. The breath factor is important as well. Essentially, in a milling song, you can breathe anywhere. I mean really, essentially. But to do *puirt-a-beul* really well, especially if somebody's actually dancing, your breath control has to be extremely good. And you have to breathe in the right places and you can't pause where you shouldn't. And so if you are keeping to a steady rhythmical pace and you are also enunciating words that in themselves are difficult to enunciate and you've got to do those clearly at a certain speed, it's not everybody who can do that extremely well. I think anybody with a will and practise can master it but, again, it's not that easy an art if you want to acquire it and really do it well, it seems to me. As far as the milling songs are concerned too, only a very few know all the verses, or a great many of the verses, of certain songs. And even then, the way it's been passed down, there's been an obfuscation of some of it. If you were to examine the meanings of some of these verses that are now being sung, you might not be entirely sure what that word was or what that was meant to convey. So there's been a kind of losing of precise clarity in meaning sometimes and it's because in the transmission of it, I think, the next person down the line, his Gaelic wasn't perhaps *quite* as good as his grandfather's or his great-grandfather's and he has a sense of what it might have sounded like and what it was, do you see, but didn't really know what the word was. So you have that kind of thing. And yet you can still sing the milling song, do you see? True, with *puirt-a-beul*, you have lots and lots of vocables and you can change them around and it doesn't matter if it's not a real word. But on the other hand, there are some that can't be made different or it's nonsense. But the meaning is *so* important and the sounds of the words together with the meaning. The whole idea of the *puirt-a-beul* is to get that just right. So if you don't do it just right, then it's—I think maybe people subconsciously have a sense of that. If they feel as if they're not going to quite handle it, then they'd rather not do it, because it really requires work, it requires getting it right, the sounds have to be just so, the rhythms have to be just so, the breathing has to be just so. And when you can do a milling song in a more social, less perfectionist environment—you can't treat [*puirt-a-beul*] the same way, I think. Also, *puirt-a-beul* tends to be sung as a solo. Generally, it was—if somebody was called upon to sing for a dance, it would be a single individual, generally. Or the best singer of *puirt-a-beul* in the village, or whatever. That's the person who would be asked to sing the strathspey, reel, jig, whatever it would be. It doesn't tend to be done as a group thing. It can be, but it doesn't tend to be. Milling, you can fade into the group.

The suggestion is that milling frolics do not require the same precision as *puirt-a-beul*.

Breathing may be done at will, particularly during the choruses, at which time one

person's breath will be covered by the group. Furthermore, the milling song soloist generally does not sing the choruses, since the remainder of the group covers them. This break allows the soloist to catch his/her breath and to recall the next verse. Puir-a-beul, which are meant to accompany dance, require careful breaths, snatched between notes so that the tune remains seamless and the rhythm is not interrupted. This is particularly hard to do because the lyrics are generally continuous in puirt-a-beul in order to provide appropriate support for a dancer. Because puirt-a-beul tend to be sung solo, there is no one else to cover the singer's mistakes. In the instrumental tradition, on the other hand, breathing is less of an issue. A fiddler has no breathing concerns whatsoever and a piper can breathe as necessary, maintaining a steady sound by compressing the air bag throughout performance.

Catriona also considers puirt-a-beul lyrics more difficult to pronounce, likely because of the speed at which lyrics must be uttered during their performance. Milling songs are not as fast and the lyrical settings are not as syllabic as puirt-a-beul, allowing the singer some time to enunciate. Additionally, milling song lyrics have not always been learned correctly, but apparently not to the detriment of the song's effectiveness. The songs may remain intelligible despite the occasional word substitution because the storyline is developed over many verses and, therefore, one incorrect word does not affect the overall understanding of the narrative. Meanwhile, puirt-a-beul rarely consist of more than two or three verses, in which many lines are repeated. Therefore, each word must be said correctly if the overall sense of the port-a-beul is to be understood. Finally, milling

song mistakes are easily covered in a group situation whereas errors made while singing puirt-a-beul solo are more apparent.

Despite puirt-a-beul's difficulties, Catriona believes that anyone, with practise, can learn to perform puirt-a-beul well. She also believes that Cape Breton singers are aware of the need to rehearse puirt-a-beul in order to sing them competently, and therefore avoid singing puirt-a-beul if they are not prepared to put in the necessary work. Because of puirt-a-beul's difficulties, Catriona calls the singing of puirt-a-beul an "art."

In response to my questioning who she thought the best puirt-a-beul singer was, Catrion responded Kenna Campbell, of Scotland, who is famous for puirt-a-beul; the entire Campbell family has specialized in it:

The best singer of puirt-a-beul in the whole world is Kenna Campbell. I think everybody would agree with that. The next best are the other members of her family because they have taken it as a matter of pride in her family to pass puirt-a-beul singing on. So her daughters all do it exceptionally well. Each member of her family, including Kenna herself, has won the *Cuach* [award trophy] for puirt-a-beul singing at the National Mòd. And the last time I was at the Mòd myself, that was in '89 when it was last in Stornoway, the second time in Stornoway, I was talking to one of Kenna's daughters and she was preparing to go into the puirt-a-beul competition and she said to me before she went on, "I must win this because it's a family honour" more or less. And she did! They prepare for it. And there's nobody who can touch them because nobody else is prepared, as they have prepared to do it just so.

Catriona believes that the Campbell family are the best singers of puirt-a-beul because they are willing to work at it. As Catriona mentioned before, puirt-a-beul do not come naturally.

As we went on to discuss good recordings of puirt-a-beul, Catriona continued to name people from Scotland. Not surprisingly, she did not single out a Cape Bretoner for

any puirt-a-beul renditions. Puirt-a-beul are well-respected in Scotland whereas, as Catriona pointed out, they have been more-or-less neglected in Cape Breton. But Catriona's description of the Campbell family makes it clear that in Scotland it is an honour to be known for singing puirt-a-beul well.

Recordings of Campbell family members, however, only appear on the odd compilation CD. Among other recorded artists, Catriona respects Mary Smith of Scotland, who Catriona says, "can do puirt-a-beul." She admires Mary Smith's recording because her Gaelic songs are sung with "No accompaniment, no embellishment, [just] the naked voice." She expanded on the reason she appreciates a minimal accompaniment:

But what I love about her [Mary Smith] best—and this is one thing that is a problem with so many Gaelic singers or other singers on tape: they—I get the sense sometimes that they do the arrangement first and fit everything else in. I know that this has been the case—I know from an actual individual involved, that the Rankin Family, that's how they do it. OK: maybe a Gaelic song, but they take the tune and they do the arrangement and then they put the words, you know? But of course you've got to start with the words. And my sense of so many song recordings in Gaelic over the last number of years is that the accompaniment and so on is too much of an embellishment—you know, it's so emphasized. And often the words are obscured; it's hard to make them out. That sort of thing. Now with Mary Smith's tape, and this is no doubt why I think it's good, because I can actually understand every single word she sings. You can actually take her tape and learn from her singing, the songs. And so there's no accompaniment but on her own, it's enough. And you can make out the words of the puirt-a-beul beautifully, clear as can be. I would say she's good.

Catriona places a clear emphasis on Gaelic lyrics, no matter what the song genre.

Linguistic concerns were emphasized throughout Catriona's interview. Even though puirt-a-beul may have repetitive lyrics, Catriona feels it is important to be able to understand every line clearly. She feels that instrumental accompaniment obfuscates the

vocal line. She is of the opinion that many Gaelic singers worry about the overall arrangement, rather than allowing the lyrics and tune to dictate the final outcome.

Because Catriona did not comment on any Cape Breton groups other than The Rankin Family, I asked her what she thought of the Gaelic song recordings being produced locally. She answered,

There are different kinds of things coming out of Cape Breton. I do think it's a very valuable thing that B&R Heritage Enterprises ... are doing. You know, releasing the actual recordings of the actual Gaelic, older Gaelic people singing their songs in a particular environment. It's preserving that and releasing it and using it as a teaching tool. I think that's good. I think they also, Rosemary and Brian, did quite a decent job with Mary Jane's first CD considering it was their first experience at all in doing it. ... And then Mary Jane, of course, went on to do a CD with another group herself. So it depends on what your goal is. And I think a way of passing something on is to release some of these old recordings and if you can make them clearer, that's something else.

Catriona refers to B&R Heritage Enterprises, owned and operated by Brian and Rosemary McCormack. They have released a number of CDs of field recordings of Gaelic song events, such as milling frolics. They have also released a number of their own CDs, such as Mary Jane Lamond's *Bho Thìr nan Craobh* and Margo Carruthers's *Tàlant nam Bàrd*, which they arranged and produced.

Catriona is not explicit here, but she may be distinguishing amongst actual field recordings and/or straight Gaelic song renditions (such as unaccompanied singing), those intended to be educational (such as B&R Heritage Enterprises's recordings), and more commercial recordings (such as Mary Jane Lamond's *Suas E!*). She recognizes that each type of recording has a different goal or point. Although she has her own preferences, she recognizes the validity of each type.

For example, Catriona mentioned The Barra MacNeils, whom she taught the port-a-beul, *Am Pige Ruadh*:

They jazzed it [*Am Pige Ruadh*] up a bit. Well, Mary Jane of course with Ashley, on *Sleepy Maggie*, that's jazzed up. I've no objection to it at all. I mean it's just another thing. It's another kind of thing. It's another kind of thing. It's not traditional but it's using some traditional material in a different way. And if it works such as it is, that's fine. I've no problem with it at all. I'm not quote-unquote "purist" in that sense. I love traditional music; that's what I prefer myself. But on the other hand, I know there are going to be all these kinds of other influences that come in. It's a modern world.

Catriona did not define the boundaries she places around "traditional" music; she did not explain when "traditional" music becomes simply "traditional material." However, in view of Catriona's earlier comments regarding her preference for a cappella Gaelic song, it likely has something to do with the addition of instrumental accompaniment. She calls commercially released puirt-a-beul such as *Sleepy Maggie* and *Am Pige Ruadh* "jazzed up" but she did not explain what she meant and I did not think to ask her.

When questioned about where the line between traditional music and non-traditional music is, Catriona answered,

Well, the closer [performers] are to the tradition, the less likely they are to be bamboozled into all kinds of amplification. I mean, I think somebody like Buddy MacMaster [a traditional fiddler], for example, it's true that he might be asked to come and play and the amplification is there before him. But he will just as likely pick up his fiddle with no amplification and think nothing of it and just do his thing and be heard just better. I haven't discussed it with him. ... But I just have the sense that he is more comfortable, he is closer to the tradition. Also, he is of a different generation. Somebody like Ashley, for example, making full use of all the modern electronic stuff—And yet, he too, will come home to Judique and play in the hall for a dance without amplification. But I think many of them have been almost conned into thinking that there is a necessity for this, all this stuff in front of them. If they were able to listen to themselves without the amplification, and then with the amplification, they'd throw the amplification out. I mean, how

could they not? When it sounds so much better? ... They've bamboozled themselves into thinking that this is how it should be and it's better if it's amplified and they're quite wrong. And I guess it will just be that way. And it's largely the younger generation though but sometimes I think the older generation is a little nervous about not doing what appears to be modern and sophisticated too.

As soon as anything electronic—as in amplification, but also likely as in synthesizers—Catriona feels that there is movement away from tradition. She prefers the idea of an acoustic, unprogrammed performance. And despite claiming to appreciate the validity of different approaches to traditional music, her own biases are clear when she claims that acoustic music sounds so much better than amplified music.

Catriona feels that both performers and audiences perceive the electronic equipment used for amplification purposes as sophisticated and modern. She feels that there is an element of having to “keep up with the Joneses” in the modernization of traditional music. Without making use of all the modern appliances available, Catriona believes that performers and audience members fear they will appear backwards and old-fashioned.

Mentioning that some people are concerned that commercialized Gaelic song paints a shallow picture of Gaelic culture, Catriona acknowledged “I've heard the same argument and sometimes I'm uneasy myself.” She mentioned the new, annual “Celtic Colours” festival in particular (cf. Chapter 3.3.c).

Catriona explained:

A year ago, when they had the Celtic Colours here, there was a whole discussion going on whether this wasn't simply an exploitation and whether in fact the true culture wasn't being properly represented. Actually, I was surprised the extent to

which the true culture was represented at all. It might not have been represented but there were wonderful ceilidhs over in Mabou. The Gaelic singers from Scotland came: Ishbel MacAskill, Mary Smith [were some] of them. Catherine-Ann MacPhee from Barra. They joined with Gaelic people in Mabou and there was a big ceilidh there. They had another one over in Iona. So you had to go to the gaidhealtachd to hear the Gaelic singing and apart from that, you'd the big showcase in Sydney with Ashley and Capercaillie. ... All the exploitation is, of course—Celtic music is so big. But this is a modern capitalistic age. Those things are going to happen. But as long as these others are going on, you don't want them to become big. You don't want them to become Centre 200 [major concert venue in Sydney] things because that in fact takes away the very heart of the community activity that it is. So you're—it's a catch-22, isn't it? If this is exploited over much, then it goes more and more and more away from what these people are hoping to preserve. So I don't know. I don't know what the answer is.

Catriona was clearly grateful that there were both big, commercialized events and small, intimate ceilidhs. She realized that the small ceilidhs were not going to attract as much attention, but at least they existed, which is more than she felt would have been allowed ten or fifteen years before. She recognizes that not everyone sought “deeper” Gaelic culture after attending a headline act, but for those who did, it was there to be discovered.

Catriona's husband arrived at this point so I finished the interview by asking Catriona what she felt the future of Gaelic in Cape Breton was. She replied,

I think it's going to live in Scotland. And as long as it lives in Scotland, it will live. Now, Cape Bretoners will throw up their arms and go, “Ugh!” They have a problem with Scotland, some Cape Bretoners do. The older native speakers don't at all because *an t-seann dhuthaich* [the old country] is a place of the heart, do you see? But younger ones have a problem. They want to say, *Gaidhlig Cheap Breatainn* [Cape Breton Gaelic]. And certainly Cape Breton has preserved things that Scotland has lost but Scotland has preserved things that Cape Breton has lost. Vocabulary, for example. It works both ways. And the more they hug it to themselves, the more in danger it is. That's my feeling. There has to be more intercommunity, there has to be a single common purpose, not many fragmented ones. That's how I feel about it.

When Catriona refers to the reaction of the younger Gaelic generation, she means that some Cape Breton Gaelic speakers have begun to assert that Cape Breton Gaelic is different from Scottish Gaelic. Catriona notes, however, that while they have some differences, they are inextricably connected, through language and history. Catriona, who is not pessimistic by nature, did not state that she fears Cape Breton Gaelic will disappear, though her comment implies as much.

5.8 Conclusions

My intention was to interview consultants with diverse puirt-a-beul experiences. As a result, singers, step dancers, and fiddlers were interviewed. My consultants have varying degrees of Gaelic fluency: they range from absolute beginners to native speakers. Amongst my consultants are Gaelic song collectors, cultural activists, teachers, amateur singers, and professional recording artists. Additionally, informants include native Cape Bretoners, Scottish immigrants, and native Scots. However, it is now clear that fiddlers and step dancers are under-represented in my research.

Still, my Cape Breton consultants revealed a number of patterns and points of contention regarding puirt-a-beul. Many consultants touched upon the same themes although they did not always share the same opinion. These themes are discussed in the next chapter, in which implications of various beliefs and contradictions are considered. Sometimes consultants' comments about puirt-a-beul reveal more about how they view Gaelic culture as a whole, or how they wish to be perceived, than about the facts of puirt-a-beul.

One of the difficulties encountered during my research was the dearth of published information regarding puirt-a-beul, particularly in Cape Breton. Much of the information provided by my consultants could not be verified. However, the facts are less important than that these “facts” are reality to the people who believe them. Exploring how these “facts” reflect the place of puirt-a-beul within Cape Breton Gaelic culture has helped me to recognize the complexity of the culture and the issues involved.

FW, my early Toronto consultant, was partly correct when she said that native Gaelic speakers do not value puirt-a-beul highly. And Hector MacNeil was correct when he told me that it would be a struggle to find native Gaelic speakers with substantial puirt-a-beul repertoires. However, there were many others – not only Gaelic learners, but also native or fluent Gaelic speakers – who do enjoy puirt-a-beul, whether they sing them or listen to them.

I started my fieldwork with some trepidation since I feared that I was researching a type of song that is not valued highly by the Cape Breton Gaelic community while naturally wanting my work to be respected by that same community. By the time my fieldwork was completed, however, it was clear that puirt-a-beul *are* an important part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, precisely *because* they are contentious. The controversy surrounding this material indicates that puirt-a-beul are in a state of flux, reflecting both the fears of those who believe that Gaelic culture is in decline, and the hopes of those who believe that Gaelic culture is undergoing a healthy revival.

CHAPTER SIX THREADS & THEMES

Until now, a lot of time has been spent explaining the cultural context in which puirt-a-beul are found and describing the people who were interviewed. At this point, recurring themes can be drawn out and examined in more detail. Although puirt-a-beul are described almost unanimously as vocal dance music sung in the absence of instruments, few consultants agreed on further issues. In fact, many consultants' comments actually *contradicted* the notion that puirt-a-beul are dance music.

Just as the previous chapters consisted of consultant portraits, this chapter is a puirt-a-beul portrait. It will quickly become apparent that puirt-a-beul have shifted in meaning, value and purpose through time. Moreover, they are used in many different ways at the present time too, depending on the singer. Considerations including age, gender, Gaelic fluency, and profession affect how puirt-a-beul are utilized by Cape Breton Gaels.

6.1 Origins

A logical starting point for the exploration of puirt-a-beul is to determine their origins. However, many consultants seemed uncertain of puirt-a-beul's origins and many commented tentatively or not at all. A number of theories were proposed and, interestingly, many contradict the others. The differences in origin theories may be a result of the diverse theories espoused by scholars through this century and/or a result of consultants' backgrounds and knowledge of Gaelic culture.

(a) Mythological Origins

Although the mythological story quoted on page 1 was published in both a scholarly journal and in Nova Scotia's popular *Celtic Heritage* magazine (April/May 1995), none of my consultants told it, summarized it, or referred to it. Unfortunately, the original field recording of this story is not readily available and I am not certain whether this story can be found in the earliest written literature. Irish mythological manuscripts date from the 8th to 12th centuries. If this story is in fact part of the early Celtic mythology, it indicates that *puirt-a-beul* were in existence at the same time that the pipes first became popular in Scotland.¹

The fact that this story is not acknowledged could be attributed to the fact that the early Irish myth cycles generally do not appear to be well-known in Cape Breton. No one referred to them, not even at the *fèisean*, which highlight Gaelic cultural history.

(b) Pre-Instrumental Theories

K.N. MacDonald asserts in *Puirt-a-Beul* that the genre derives from an ancient, and now lost, Druidic language (1931:3). Since MacDonald's collection of *puirt-a-beul* has had little circulation in Cape Breton and Canada in general, it was surprising that two consultants, Beth MacNeil of Cape Breton and David Livingston-Lowe of Toronto, had heard of this hypothesis, although neither could remember their sources. As David

commented, the theory is amusing to entertain but is unlikely to be true. However, since next to nothing is known about the Druids, MacDonald's romantic claim cannot be definitively disproven.

Although MacDonald's allegations may seem fanciful, they reveal something about how he uses puirt-a-beul to legitimize Gaelic culture. Although puirt-a-beul seem to be simple, according to MacDonald they are actually ancient and mystical, associated with the powerful and mysterious Druids. Their value increases in proportion with their age. Instead of dismissing puirt-a-beul as simple, nonsensical, and amateurish, MacDonald reveres them as cultural artefacts capable of revealing the history of the Gaels.

Whereas other scholars are not so bold as to associate puirt-a-beul with the Druids, there are those who do assert that puirt-a-beul pre-date instruments and that, therefore, instrumental tunes derive from puirt-a-beul. George S. Emmerson suggests that puirt-a-beul evolved from a primitive urge to sing and dance (1971:6), but indecisively adds that the term "puirt-a-beul" suggests that these songs developed *after* instrumental music (1971: 5). Equally vague is Jackie Dunn's contradictory claim to the same effect (1991:16, 20). In fact, because puirt-a-beul refrains are repeated after each verse, as with instrumental tunes, Dr. Alan Bruford concludes that they likely originated in imitation of instrumental music (1979:11). However, many songs without any

¹ War pipes can be traced to the 9th century but did not become popular until the 11th century. Highland bagpipes did not develop into their current form until the 19th century (class lecture by Dr. David Wilson, January 7, 1998).

association with dance also repeat the refrain after each verse. Are these forms imitating dance music forms as well? Bruford's argument needs further explanation.

Despite scholars' uncertainty, several consultants agreed that puirt-a-beul predate instrumental tunes (B. MacNeil, J. MacNeil, Parsons). Catriona Parsons, without being able to prove it, declares that puirt-a-beul "must have" dated from the beginning of Celtic society, since there would have been a natural impulse to dance, accompanied by voice. Although it is quite likely that a form of vocal dance music predated instruments, there is no indication that it was puirt-a-beul as they are known today. It may be that Cape Bretoners feel the need to justify Gaelic culture at a time when the number of native Gaelic speakers is quickly declining and when they are fighting for the funds necessary to establish Gaelic in the school curriculum. Western European and American culture prizes antiquity; therefore the age of Gaelic culture in general, and puirt-a-beul in particular, offers a means of legitimizing it and justifying the cost of maintaining it.

(c) Post-Instrumental Theories

Kenna Campbell, the famous Scottish puirt-a-beul singer whose radio interview was translated for me by Rhoda MacRitchie, believes that puirt-a-beul were developed in tandem with the Highland bagpipe. This belief affects her performance style; her grace notes and enunciation make her sound very like a bagpipe. However, the majority of my consultants believe that puirt-a-beul originated after the development of instruments, although they tended to be divided on whether puirt-a-beul originated in connection with

pipe tunes or fiddle music. Rhoda MacRitchie associates puirt-a-beul with pipe tunes, likely because she has been influenced by Kenna Campbell's theory and because she may have had more exposure to bagpipe music than fiddle music.

Stephanie Conn, singer with Puirt-a-Baroque, suggested that some puirt-a-beul lyrics may have been set to well-known tunes by famous Scottish fiddle composers, such as Niel Gow and Marshall, dating back to at least the 18th century. She compares the situation to that in Western art music, when words were set to well-known classical, instrumental tunes (e.g. *The Beggar's Opera* includes songs set to tunes by Geminiani and Purcell). Although Stephanie is committed to learning and promoting Gaelic song and culture, she is still more comfortable with her knowledge of western art music, as a result of her graduate studies in music. Furthermore, her work with David Greenberg means that she is more familiar with Scottish and Cape Breton fiddle music than with bagpipe traditions.

(d) Banning of Bagpipes

Several widely-available sources on puirt-a-beul suggest that puirt-a-beul originated specifically after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, when Highland culture was seriously restricted: “the Disarming Acts banned the bagpipes—‘engines of war’—and the wearing of tartan. How rigidly these provisions were enforced is doubtful; psychologically, however, the message was clear. The Gaelic culture itself was condemned” (MacLeod 1996:183). Francis Collinson writes, “the *puirt-a-beul* tradition

is of uncertain origin. Some believe it arose as a substitute for the bagpipe when that instrument was proscribed after the 18th-century Jacobite risings; but this could only be likely if other musical instruments, such as the harp or fiddle, had also been forbidden, which they were not”(1980). According to this theory, puirt-a-beul developed in response to the banning of the bagpipes, which normally would have accompanied dancing. However, despite the widespread belief that the bagpipes were banned in the Disarming Act, *Am Bràighe* ran an article that called this fact into question:

The sole contemporary evidence that might lead one to think that the English government paid any attention to the existence of bagpipes is an incident directly after Culloden. The English rounded up what Jacobite soldiers they hadn't killed after Culloden and brought them to England to be tried for treason The English were, of course, eager to condemn and punish as many as possible so as to make an example of the Jacobites which none would ever want to emulate again. When it was found that one James Reid did not carry arms but pipes, the Court in York observed that “a Highland regiment never marched without a piper.” This was sufficient reason to condemn him to death in 1747 for playing a part in the treasonous Jacobite rebellion. Later commentators take this to mean that the pipes were therefore officially considered an “instrument of war,” but this is never stated. There is no evidence that the York Court had any influence on the creation of the 1747 Act of proscription, made in London (Michael Newton, “Were the bagpipes ever banned in Scotland?” *Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton] Summer 1997:20).

Whether or not the bagpipes were officially proscribed, however, the Highland culture was broken as a result of restrictions imposed by the Disarming Act, which did in fact forbid the wearing of the tartan, and the clearances. Once the English defeated the Gaels, the latter may not have taken any pride in playing the bagpipes. English law enforcement officers may have made it difficult to play bagpipes, even if they were still officially legal. Perhaps Gaels believed that the bagpipes were legally banned, even if they were

not. It is also possible that they did not have the means of purchasing or making instruments.

With the restrictions on the bagpipe, whether official or not, *puirt-a-beul* came to play an important role in Gaelic culture. First, they preserved instrumental tunes until they could be safely reintroduced to musicians at a later date.² Second, they allowed dances to continue, despite a lack of musicians. Dances would have been particularly important at this repressive time as they would have provided a physical and emotional outlet. Third, the lyrics may have offered the opportunity for Gaels to comment satirically on the social conditions of the time. Currently, there is an undocumented corpus of bawdy *puirt-a-beul* (cf. Chapter 6.4.b) that may indicate that they were composed after the Act of proscription. Bawdy lyrics may have allowed Gaels to express their frustration in a socially acceptable manner.³ There are interesting parallels with African-American music:

Traditionally, white power structures have found blacks least threatening when they are singing ... about sex and dancing. As a result, such songs have ended up, to a greater or lesser extent, as codes for singing about virtually every subject under the sun (Murray 1989:59).

Furthermore, the use of vocables and nonsensical phrases in *puirt-a-beul* may actually have had hidden meanings. For example, the lyrics to the popular *port-a-beul*, “Am

² My grandmother, who attended Elderhostel in Pictou in June 1998, told me that students were taught that *puirt-a-beul* were created during the prohibition of pipes and were originally all old pipe tunes. Interestingly, she said that they were told that they were preserved almost exclusively by women and that the women kept them until the pipes were allowed again (Fieldnotes: June 5).

³ This hypothesis cannot yet be borne out for two reasons. First, bawdy *puirt-a-beul* are difficult to collect and I have only heard two (cf. Chapter 6.4.b). Second, most *puirt-a-beul* remain untranslated. I cannot undertake a lyric analysis until my Gaelic is more fluent and I am in a better position to understand any cultural *double entendres* and hidden meanings.

Muilean Dubh” (The Dark Mill) are said to refer in code to Bonnie Prince Charlie’s hideout after the Battle of Culloden.

Although puirt-a-beul may have become popular after the Battle of Culloden, they may well have been in existence prior to the Jacobite rebellions. It is entirely possible that puirt-a-beul had developed earlier and simply became more relevant and widely practised in the mid-1700s.

Despite the prevalence of the bagpipe banning theory in published accounts of the origins of puirt-a-beul, none of my consultants supported it, perhaps as a result of the even more recent *Am Bràighe* article. Instead, a number of my consultants believed that puirt-a-beul developed in response to 19th century Presbyterian restrictions placed on dancing.

(e) Banning of Secular Music

Charles Dunn writes that “before they emigrated from Scotland, the Highlanders in some areas had been instructed by severe spiritual advisers that [secular] singing was sinful (Dunn 1991 [1953]:39). MacLeod writes, “instrumental music, traditional Gaelic song, folk-tale—these were now shunned. Many actually destroyed fiddles and other instruments when [Presbyterian] revival came to their district” (1996:221). Dunn explains:

The Highland settlers brought with them to America not only their vast body of folk-literature and history but also a zest for music. This valued heritage had been severely attacked by the Protestant clergy, who disapproved of worldly music just as much as they disliked the ‘lying stories’ so popular among the Gaels. In

Scotland they had succeeded in stamping out the knowledge and use of the harp and lyre and bellow-pipes; they had fulminated, although less effectively, against the bagpipes and the fiddle. Well-meaning, godly elders of the Presbyterian Church had solemnly smashed the fiddles and burnt the pipes of those carnally minded people who wished to cling to their beloved instruments (1991 [1953]:54).

For all the same reasons that puirt-a-beul may have developed in response to the banning of the bagpipes, they may have emerged (again) with the banning of fiddles and dancing. Dances could continue to be held if accompanied by song rather than by instrument, particularly since it would be much easier to cease singing at the approach of unwanted guests than to hide an instrument. Similarly, singing does not project as far as an instrument and therefore vocal dance accompaniment would be harder to overhear by passerby.

The fiddle banning theory may have considerable weight in Cape Breton because Presbyterian restrictions were experienced by Cape Bretoners as well Scots. The alleged banning of the bagpipes happened prior to the height of Scottish emigration to Cape Breton, whereas the Presbyterian limitations were imposed in the midst of it. Furthermore, the fiddle represents a strong symbol of Gaelic identity for Cape Bretoners. It is therefore not surprising that they would relate more strongly to a theory involving the fiddle than the bagpipes.

There is another difference between the Act of proscription and the Presbyterian restriction theories. In the former, Gaels suffer at the hands of outsider (English) discrimination whereas in the latter, they are repressed by insiders: their own ministers. Gaelic emigration history is being rewritten at present. In the past, Gaels have been

described as the depressed powerless who had no choice but to move from their beloved homeland. Recently, however, scholars have suggested that many Gaels moved voluntarily.⁴ The Act of proscription theory works well within the belief that Gaels were victims of vicious landowners interested only in making a profit. Although there is no denying that many Gaels were unjustly and violently evicted from their Scottish lands, there is a growing recognition that many Gaels actively resisted English domination by taking matters into their own hands and relocating of their own accord. The religious banning of instruments makes more sense when it is understood that Gaels were in control of their own destiny, even if they sometimes acted in poor judgment. As Gaels reconsider their history, it is not surprising that the latter theory is becoming more popular than the former theory.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the origins of puirt-a-beul will ever be ascertained with any certainty. However, in the limited scope of my research, I have not been able to trace any tunes prior to the Battle of Culloden (1746) except for one reference to “Tullochgorm” in a manuscript dating from 1734.⁵ Although it is quite possible that “Tullochgorm” did not have Gaelic port-a-beul lyrics associated with it at the time, it is also feasible that it did. The fact that puirt-a-beul were not set down in print until much later does not rule out their earlier existence.

⁴ Two examples of scholarly papers come immediately to mind: Dr. Michael Kennedy’s presentation in Scotsville, Cape Breton (June 6, 1998) and Dr. Michael Vance’s paper, “A Scottish Diaspora? Imagining Scotia and Nova Scotia” presented at the University of Guelph Scottish Studies conference, “The Emigrant Experience: The Scottish Diaspora” (October 16, 1999).

Although the “true” origins of puirt-a-beul cannot be ascertained, the plurality of theories is still revealing. Each theory has had its place, depending on the context in which it was asserted. The theories espoused by individuals are highly suggestive of how they perceive Gaelic history and the place Gaels hold within the world. Early attempts to legitimize Gaelic culture through romanticization and claims of antiquity gave way to theories asserting that Gaelic culture was unjustly abolished before its time. Theories now reflect the desire of Gaels to take control of their own future and reaffirm their culture’s viability and worth.

6.2 Venues

If puirt-a-beul are vocal dance accompaniment—the generally agreed-upon definition—then one would expect to hear them at a dance. Although this may have been one venue at which puirt-a-beul was sung historically, they have been and continue to be sung in a much larger range of venues. Just as concepts regarding puirt-a-beul have shifted over time (cf. Chapters 6.1 and 6.4), a horizontal continuum, the places in which puirt-a-beul are performed have multiplied, creating a vertical continuum.

(a) Home

At one time, it seems that puirt-a-beul were frequently sung in the home by women as they did domestic chores, entertained their children, or taught them fiddle

⁵ Young Fiddle Collection, as cited in Jacqueline Dunn’s 1991 thesis.

tunes or how to step-dance (cf. Chapters 6.4.c, d and e). Margo Carruthers said, “both Alec Currie and Buddy MacMaster, exceptionally fine piper and fiddler, claim to have learned their tunes and timing from hearing their mothers sing puirt-a-beul.” Beth MacNeil argued that “it seems like in Cape Breton, what kept puirt-a-beul alive basically would’ve been mothers with their children Maybe they were just carrying on a little bit and step dancing around the kitchen.”

Although many consultants talked of puirt-a-beul having accompanied women’s domestic labour or of how puirt-a-beul have been used by both mothers and fathers to entertain and soothe children, they all maintained their definition of puirt-a-beul as dance music. There are a number of possible explanations for these apparent contradictions. First, puirt-a-beul may well have once been used to accompany community dances but were later used in the domestic domain instead of, or in addition to, the public domain. This historical shift may not have been recognized or articulated by my consultants. Second, to acknowledge that puirt-a-beul were appropriated by women is to acknowledge that they were in the control of a particular segment of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, rather than in the control of the entire community. If Gaels are indeed attempting to redirect their own destiny, as suggested in Chapter 6.1, then it is not surprising that they conveniently ignore or forget this particular aspect of puirt-a-beul practise.

Third, gender issues loom large. Puirt-a-beul may well have replaced milling songs as the primary expression of women’s culture after men came to participate in and even dominate milling frolics (cf. Chapter 3.4.a). Although some consultants were

insistent that women's labour in Gaelic culture has always been respected as highly as men's labour and that labour divisions were therefore equitable, if different, there are indications to the contrary:

There was a sharp cleavage between the duties of the sexes and their work, and those of one did not do those of the other. The native of Washabuckt [Cape Breton] was always astounded when abroad to find men waiting on tables or cooking and washing dishes in hotels and restaurants, for these he considered the prerogatives as well as the duties of women, and his opinion of men that would do such things cannot be recorded in polite language (MacNeil 1958:21).

MacNeil adds, "[men's] work was mostly seasonal, so they never worked hard for long. The work of the women never ended, however" (1958:20-1). If women's work was not as highly valued as men's, then it is not surprising that women's labour songs are also not valued as highly as men's. Moreover, women's use of puirt-a-beul may have acted to resist patriarchal culture, although this has yet to be substantiated. The unequal division of labour and women's frustration with their roles would only be highlighted if puirt-a-beul were "officially" acknowledged as having been women's culture at one point in time. If women resisted hegemonic forces via puirt-a-beul, then recognition of puirt-a-beul as women's songs threatens the solidarity and united front of Gaelic culture in Cape Breton.

(b) Milling Frolics

In Harris, Scotland, puirt-a-beul were occasionally sung to accompany dancing after a milling/waulking (MacRitchie). The dance allowed tired, cramped muscles to be stretched out and also served to celebrate the completion of the waulking. Frank Rhodes

suggests that this also happened in Cape Breton (1964:275), although I never heard puirt-a-beul sung at a milling frolic myself. Beth agreed that she would never sing puirt-a-beul at a milling frolic. On the other hand, David Livingston-Lowe remembered having heard a teenager sing a port-a-beul at a milling frolic when it came around to his turn to sing, although his choice of repertoire may have been a result of lack of experience or song repertoire. Alternatively, the teenager may have been deliberately rebelling against cultural codes.

If puirt-a-beul were a part of women's culture, then it is logical that they were sung after a waulking, which was also a part of women's domain. As men become increasingly involved in milling frolics in Cape Breton and as women's songs were left out in favour of men's (cf. Chapter 3.4.a), it is reasonable to suggest presume that women moved puirt-a-beul into the domestic sphere.

It is also possible that puirt-a-beul stopped being used at milling frolics because of the latter's own shifting function. As milling frolics became less utilitarian and more social, there was not as much reason to stretch muscles out and celebrate completed labour by means of a concluding dance. Whereas milling frolics once lasted through the night, they now rarely extend more than two hours. Singers and audience members alike are not prepared to lengthen their stay with a dance.

(c) Competitions

As described in Chapter 3, the Royal National Mòd in Scotland includes puirt-a-beul categories for soloists and choirs. North American Mòds, however, do not specify special puirt-a-beul categories for their competitions (to judge from a perusal of Mòd websites and literature). Rhoda MacRitchie corroborated my conclusion. Beth MacNeil is of the opinion that since the Scottish Mòd includes puirt-a-beul categories, “that’s probably why it was kept there and people hear it more and it’s right there in front of you, but in Cape Breton, it’s been put aside.” Mary Jane Lamond concurs: “nobody was a champion puirt-a-beul singer until the Mòd in Scotland. And that’s really drawn a lot of attention to puirt-a-beul.” She concludes that, in Scotland, puirt-a-beul “were kept alive by the Mòd.”

But while there may be no official puirt-a-beul categories, competitors may still choose to perform puirt-a-beul at North American Mòds. It was reported that, during the 1993 Ontario Mòd, “there was a lively, informal puirt-a-beul (mouth music) competition and Cape Breton songs” at the Friday night ceilidh (*Am Bràighe* [Cape Breton] Autumn 1993:11). Maxie MacNeil described how the song he sang at an informal Ontario Mòd event (1984) was labelled a port-a-beul, even though he disagreed. However, these two instances were informal events and it does not appear that puirt-a-beul are frequently sung competitively in North America. For example, the only puirt-a-beul performed at the 1998 Nova Scotia Gaelic Mòd were in a set by the Gaelic College choir, under the direction of Catriona Parsons (fieldnotes August 8, 1998).

(d) Recordings

Audio recordings provide one of the most consistent venues for puirt-a-beul. Beth notes that “you can usually find one or two port-a-beuls” on most commercial recordings of Gaelic song. Cape Breton artists such as Mary Jane Lamond, Ashley MacIsaac, The Barra MacNeils, Margo Carruthers, and The Rankins have all recorded puirt-a-beul on at least one album each. Of course, there are many Scottish singers who have recorded puirt-a-beul as well, and these recordings are readily available in Cape Breton and across Canada. Stephanie Conn, one of my Toronto consultants, sings puirt-a-beul with Puirt-a-Baroque on their album, *Return of the Wanderer*. In addition to commercial recordings, there are a number of recordings of puirt-a-beul in archived collections, particularly the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project.

From a researcher’s perspective, it is unfortunate—but not necessarily surprising—that many recordings offer only minimal information about the puirt-a-beul included. For example, the puirt-a-beul may not be named (instead, they are frequently put into sets and simply titled “puirt-a-beul”), the source/teacher may not be identified, and the traditional puirt-a-beul venues are not specified. While the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project is an invaluable Cape Breton Gaelic song resource, it raises many questions. Since the interviewers are never heard on the recordings, it is impossible to determine whether consultants were prompted to supply particular types of songs or

whether consultants provided accompanying stories and information pertaining to them (fieldnotes June 2, 1998).

The inclusion of puirt-a-beul on recordings of various sorts has important consequences. Recordings are frequently used in classroom settings (see below). Recording artists often promote their recordings by touring and therefore sing their puirt-a-beul tracks live in concert (see below). Tracks may be played on radio programs or developed into music videos, and cinematic productions may avail themselves of recordings for soundtrack purposes. Recordings are also significant because of their accessibility to large, heterogeneous populations and because they legitimate the songs which they include. This is one of the reasons that Rosemary McCormack expressed concern for the inclusion of untraditional renditions of Gaelic songs on recordings: “to me, they have very little connection with Gaelic tradition. And to say that people are learning and coming into Gaelic tradition from hearing that kind of thing, I really doubt very much if they are. Or if they’re coming at anything terribly real in the culture from that sort of pop facsimile of mouth music.” Anyone familiar with Cape Breton Gaelic culture would comprehend how a commercial version of a Gaelic song differed from its traditional rendition. For anyone unfamiliar with the culture, the recorded versions could be misunderstood. Rosemary recounted an incident in which she was involved:

We had our Gaelic Gold recording. We had somebody from Alaska just recently called up—they had seen *our* description of Gaelic Gold in a paper which was sent to them, so we weren’t hiding anything. They called us. They wanted two copies. We sent them the copies. We got them back in the mail about two weeks later and they said “this isn’t Celtic music! I wanted Celtic music! Could you please send me some Celtic music instead?” So, that’s really hard. So they got a

letter back saying, “Celtic music is what comes out of the culture and experience and character and history of the people who speak the Celtic languages. You could not find anything more Celtic music than traditional Gaelic singing from Cape Breton.” ... That is the downside of the sort of poppy stuff that some groups are doing because that becomes the standard by which Gaelic stuff is judged. The music industry and the majority of the listening public out there doesn’t realize that, to people within the culture, that stuff is not acceptable or is just barely acceptable as Gaelic stuff.

There are many reasons why puirt-a-beul might be recorded and these are considered in Chapter 6.4.

(e) Concerts

A number of my consultants argued that puirt-a-beul were not something one would normally hear performed in public. Beth mused, “Here in Cape Breton, it doesn’t seem that puirt-a-beul is ever something that people performed. It wasn’t a performance thing, it wasn’t considered, like if you were at a ceilidh type thing, that you would stand up and sing puirt-a-beul as adults. It doesn’t seem to have had its place.” Mary Jane noted that when “people would gather together for a ceilidh, I don’t think someone would sing puirt-a-beul except maybe they might sing one or two and someone might give a couple of steps.” And yet Rhoda remembered hearing puirt-a-beul sung publicly in Scotland: “When I used to go to ceilidhs and concerts, I thought puirt were great.” While the tradition of singing puirt-a-beul in public may have differed in Scotland and Cape Breton in the past, puirt-a-beul are now starting to be heard at Cape Breton concerts.

In Chapter 2, some of the different types of concerts held in Cape Breton were outlined. Briefly, they can be summarized as follows: performer-centred concerts

(featuring one artist or group), outdoor variety concerts, and *fêis* concerts. The reasons for singing puirt-a-beul at each differ and are explored in Chapter 6.4.

As already mentioned, puirt-a-beul are frequently found on commercial recordings of Gaelic song. Recording artists tour and promote their albums by staging concerts, at which they sing selections from their albums, including puirt-a-beul. At Margo Carruthers's CD release party, her set of puirt-a-beul was withheld for the grand finale, since puirt-a-beul are energetic and flashy. Brian and Rosemary McCormack and Beth MacNeil also sang some puirt-a-beul. It is interesting, however, that Margo did *not* sing her puirt-a-beul at the Highland Village Day concert.

While browsing the documents held at the Beaton Institute at the University College Cape Breton, I discovered a 1990 program for *Oranaiche Cheap Breatuinn* ("Cape Breton Choir"). They were performing in Massachusetts at the invitation of the Boston Branch of the Cape Breton Island Gaelic Foundation for a "Golden Jubilee" celebration. The choir's program was divided into three sections. Both the first and second sections concluded with puirt-a-beul (unnamed), and the final section included puirt-a-beul as the penultimate selection, only followed by *Oidhche Mhath Leibh*, a traditional farewell song.

Mary Jane Lamond sang several puirt-a-beul during her concert at Grand Narrows, Cape Breton, but she made sure to save "*Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean*," the album's first single and a port-a-beul, for the end of the concert. Not only did Mary Jane have the benefit of being a musically fitting conclusion to the concert, but the song was

also well-known by the audience. On the other hand, Mary Jane pointed out that she does far more concerts outside Cape Breton than inside, despite the fact that her songs are all from Cape Breton: “one time a year I’ll do a concert in Cape Breton and not even every year.”

But concert performances of puirt-a-beul are not reserved for professional singers only. Non-professional singers have ample opportunities to sing at outdoor concerts and at *fèis* concerts. Catriona’s choir sang puirt-a-beul at the “Gaelic Choir Night” concert sponsored by *Fèis an Eilein* (July 17). Janet Buchanan, Michelle Smith, and Bonnie Thompson also sang a set of puirt-a-beul at that particular concert. Two other *Fèis an Eilein* concerts included puirt-a-beul: on July 24, Jeff MacDonald sang puirt-a-beul to accompany the dancing of Bhreagh MacDonald (no relation) at the “Night of Music and Dancing” concert, and on August 14, Willie Fraser sang puirt-a-beul to accompany the step dancing of his granddaughter at the “Dancers’ Night” concert. Beth MacNeil discussed how she will frequently choose to sing puirt-a-beul for an outdoor concert: “If you’re at an outdoor concert type thing, people are there to be entertained. And the puirt-a-beul is entertaining.” However, Beth carefully considers whether her audience consists of tourists or Cape Breton Gaels before singing puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapters 6.4 and 6.6).

(f) Classroom

Puirt-a-beul is frequently heard in the classroom. I myself learned a port-a-beul in my first year of Gaelic lessons. Since then, I have been taught a number of puirt-a-beul

in different classrooms and with other teachers. Margo Carruthers talked about using puirt-a-beul in her classroom as well, calling them “excellent learning tools.” Informal conversations with many Gaelic learners have shown that puirt-a-beul—while not the only Gaelic song type learned—form a standard part of Gaelic language and song lessons. Sometimes students hear examples of puirt-a-beul on a commercial or field recording. At other times, the teacher sings and teaches students a port-a-beul as part of the lesson (reasons for both are discussed in Chapter 6.4).

As with recordings, classroom use tends to legitimize puirt-a-beul. Teachers, as authorities on Gaelic language and culture, indicate by teaching them that puirt-a-beul are a significant part of Gaelic song culture. Teachers’ sound pedagogical reasons for teaching puirt-a-beul to Gaelic learners, however, may not always accord with cultural attitudes towards puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapter 6.6).

Puirt-a-beul are now also being taught specifically in workshops. In 1998, two were conducted by Catriona Parsons at the Gaelic College during the Mòd weekend and the Christmas Island *Fèis*, each involving different puirt-a-beul. Catriona said, “There have been more workshops in puirt-a-beul. Certainly at *Fèis an Eilein* I’ve done workshops in the past and I’ve had nine or ten [people] but last week or whenever it was, there were 23 or 24.” Margo also mentioned having taught song workshops that included puirt-a-beul. Sometimes Gaelic song workshops are conducted by visiting artists from Scotland. For example, Kenna Campbell, the renowned puirt-a-beul singer, held a

workshop at the Highland Village Inn on August 8, 1991 when she was visiting Cape Breton.

It is interesting to compare the availability and popularity of puirt-a-beul workshops in Cape Breton with those in Scotland. Christine Primrose, well-known singer and commercially recorded Gaelic song artist from Lewis in Scotland, mentioned that a puirt-a-beul workshop was conducted at the Gaelic College on Skye. The instructor went through the entire MacDonald book, *Puirt-a-Beul*, and every major Scottish Gaelic singer was in attendance (fieldnotes July 14, 1998).

(g) Media

In 1966, Collinson wrote that “most people will have heard on the radio these Gaelic songs for providing, by vocal means, music for dancing; for the spectacle of dancing to mouth-music is now a common one on television” (93). Kenna Campbell’s interview on *Raideo nan Gaidheal*, which Rhoda played for me, is a perfect example. While there are significantly fewer opportunities for Gaelic song to be aired on radio and television in Cape Breton, some programs do showcase puirt-a-beul. For example, Ashley MacIsaac’s hit single, “Sleepy Maggie,” actually includes a port-a-beul, *Am Muilean Dubh* (“The Black Mill”), as well as the tune, “Sleepy Maggie.” “Sleepy Maggie” received wide radio play and it was performed at the 1995 East Coast Music Awards, which was broadcast live.

Chapter 2 describes a few local radio programs that include puirt-a-beul. The Beaton Institute has records of the weekly programming for “Island Echoes,” the CBC radio show. They indicate that puirt-a-beul were regularly featured, although they were almost invariably from Scotland (fieldnotes August 6, 1998). Kay MacDonald, one time hostess of “Island Echoes,” revealed that Scottish recordings were used for a long time because there were so few Cape Breton recordings available until more recently.

(h) Other Events

There are a few venues at which puirt-a-beul were performed that do not fit well into the above categories. For example, Janet explained how she once sang puirt-a-beul at a family reunion to accompany some young girls who had forgotten their music and wished to demonstrate highland dancing. Beth and her daughter, Jenna, sang some puirt-a-beul at an event staged at the Highland Village Inn (June 13) for the amusement of the Inn’s guests, largely tourists from Ontario on a bus tour. Rosemary McCormack chose to sing puirt-a-beul with her husband, Brian, at a community dinner celebrating the 50th anniversary of Father Morley’s ordination, the priest at the Iona Catholic church. They took turns singing the verses, singing in unison together at the end. At the July 21 “Margaree Harbour Gaelic song night” (cf. Chapter 3.4.a), two participants, Colin Watson and Linda MacLellan, each sang a long set of puirt-a-beul as a demonstration of the variety of Gaelic song types found in Cape Breton.

Far from being limited to dance halls, it is clear that puirt-a-beul are heard in diverse venues across Cape Breton. When one considers the reasons why puirt-a-beul might be sung at these different venues (cf. Chapter 6.6), it becomes obvious that puirt-a-beul function in various ways, depending on the performer and the audience.

6.3 Performance Issues

Puirt-a-beul often appear to be one of the simplest song types to sing. This apparent simplicity has resulted in their use in the classroom with language learners. David Livingston-Lowe suggested that they are a standard part of children's repertoire, again indicating that puirt-a-beul are not technically demanding. On the other hand, the Royal National Mòd in Scotland includes puirt-a-beul competitions that are open only to fluent Gaelic speakers. The Mòd does not offer any specific puirt-a-beul categories for language learners. What follows is an identification of those elements that make puirt-a-beul vocally demanding. Puirt-a-beul performance strategies are then examined, with consideration given to how these strategies increase or decrease the difficulty of puirt-a-beul performance.

(a) Technical Difficulties

Many consultants noted how difficult it is to breathe during the performance of puirt-a-beul: "to do puirt-a-beul really well, especially if somebody's actually dancing, your breath control has to be extremely good. And you have to breathe in the right places

and you can't pause where you shouldn't" (Parsons). Breathing must be carefully planned from the beginning so that breaths will not interrupt the music. Proper breathing ensures proper rhythm. Improper breathing results in an irregular rhythm, unacceptable for dance. If the rhythm is altered, the dance will suffer: "you've just gotta keep going [when singing puirt-a-beul], keep the beat. The most important thing is the beat" (Buchanan).

Breath control and rhythm are made more difficult by the tempo at which puirt-a-beul must be sung. Again, since they are meant to accompany dancing, the tempo must be fast enough to keep dancers light on their feet. The dance will falter or become impossible if the tempo of the music is too slow. At the same time, the quick tempo makes puirt-a-beul even more difficult for the singer: "I find if I start them out too fast, then I know I'm screwed. I've started them too fast and I haven't given myself enough time to breathe and I just don't feel like I've done what I should with it" (Buchanan).

Deceptively simple, puirt-a-beul lyrics are also problematic. Although they are generally repetitive and frequently contain vocables, they tend to be difficult to enunciate clearly. Many consultants called puirt-a-beul "tongue-twisters." The combination of breathing, rhythm, tempo, and enunciation make puirt-a-beul difficult to sing well at full speed: "if you are keeping to a steady rhythmical pace and you are also enunciating words that in themselves are difficult to enunciate and you've got to do those clearly at a certain speed, it's not everybody who can do that extremely well" (Parsons).

(b) Ensemble Options

Because puirt-a-beul are so difficult to perform, Dr. Alan Bruford argues that puirt-a-beul were probably always used to show off a singer's ability rather than to accompany dance:

in practice they were probably always predominantly what they are today, songs designed to exhibit the singer's vocal agility—a few puirt-a-beul have five or six verses, but most have only one or two, and it would need not only a good memory but double-ended lungs and a rubber tongue to keep up the words for the length, say, of an eightsome reel; though supplemented with a bit of diddling and missing a beat now and then to draw breath, as singers have to, it might just be possible (1978:7).

Although Dr. Bruford's assessment of the difficulties of puirt-a-beul is astute, he does not consider that puirt-a-beul might once have been performed by several people.

Puirt-a-beul are traditionally considered a solo song genre: "if somebody was called upon to sing for a dance, it would be a single individual ... It doesn't tend to be done as a group thing" (Parsons). However, I heard them sung by multiple performers on several occasions. Beth MacNeil sang puirt-a-beul in duet with her daughter, Jenna, at a ceilidh at the Highland Village Inn (June 14, 1998). A husband-and-wife team sang the same set of puirt-a-beul together at two different events. They sometimes sang in unison, and sometimes took turns singing lines so that the other person had opportunities to breathe (Brian and Rosemary McCormack, June 13 and July 30, 1998). The St. Ann's Gaelic College choir repertoire also included puirt-a-beul.

There are several reasons to consider that puirt-a-beul have been sung in groups rather than as solos. First, the difficulty of puirt-a-beul performance is eased when sung

by more than one person. Any pauses, errors, or breaths by one person can be covered by the other. Second, each performer has the chance to rest, preventing breathlessness and exhaustion. Third, vocal projection is increased, which is important when considering that puirt-a-beul once accompanied dance. It would be difficult to hear a single voice over stomping feet. Finally, I am unaware of any documentation that indicates definitively that puirt-a-beul were intended to be sung as solos, or that they were historically performed as solos.

(c) Harmony and Accompaniment

Because puirt-a-beul are considered a solo song genre, they are necessarily monophonic. However, when two or more people perform puirt-a-beul together, the opportunity for harmony arises. On *Suas e!*, Mary Jane Lamond sings “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” in harmony with herself. Jenna added a countermelody to her mother’s singing at the June 14 ceilidh.⁶ While the recital of puirt-a-beul by two or more people may ease some unison performance problems, harmony increases the difficulty level. When using harmony, singers must be even more conscious of tuning. The singers cannot rest since all parts are essential to the harmonized rendition. It is interesting to note that the Royal National Mòd stipulates that the junior puirt-a-beul choir categories are to be sung in unison, perhaps due to the difficulty of singing puirt-a-beul in harmony.

⁶ Both Mary Jane Lamond and the MacNeils sing in rhythmic unison while employing harmony.

Since puirt-a-beul are most often seen as a replacement for instrumental music, they are traditionally sung a cappella. However, some of my consultants make puirt-a-beul easier to perform by including instrumental accompaniment: “That’s rather nice because, for the singer, it gives you a chance to snatch a breath. Whereas if you’re doing it unaccompanied, there’s nothing worse than gulping for breath in the middle of the line” (MacRitchie). The use of instrumental accompaniment allows the singer to breathe freely during instrumental interludes, or during bridges between each port-a-beul. Since fiddlers, guitarists and pianists⁷ are not concerned with breathing, phrases can flow easily from one to another. Additionally, instrumental accompaniment encourages a steady tempo. Recorded versions frequently have a fiddle play the instrumental tune associated with the port-a-beul, demonstrating the close link between them. Transitions between puirt-a-beul in a set are made easier with instrumental interludes, which can gradually set a new tempo, metre, and/or key.

Artists rarely record puirt-a-beul without at least some instrumental accompaniment, although the degree to which instruments are present varies. For example, even though B&R Heritage Enterprises aspires to the production of “traditional” Gaelic song albums, the sets of puirt-a-beul sung by Margo Carruthers on *Tàlant nam Bàrd* and by Mary Jane Lamond on *Bho Thìr nan Craobh* both include piano and fiddle accompaniment. Mary Jane Lamond’s “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” involves even more complex instrumental and vocal arrangements.

⁷ These instruments are frequently used to accompany Gaelic song in Cape Breton; see for example *Bho Thìr nan Craobh* (Lamond) and *Tàlant nam Bàrd* (Carruthers).

While people like Rhoda MacRitchie embrace the freedom instrumentation allows them as singers, others are concerned that instrumental accompaniment is altering the face of Gaelic song. Jamie MacNeil dryly noted, “one of the things they’re doing is just throwing in the instrumentals with this. Which is all right but it certainly makes it easier for them which I suppose is why they’re doing it. [You can] cover up a lot of sins with music!” In other words, a singer’s misplaced breath will not break the rhythm and beat if the musicians continue playing. Instruments obscure vocal errors that would be noticeable in a solo performance.

In general, evidence does not support any claim that puirt-a-beul were historically accompanied instrumentally, as a rule. However, the Fletts note that “if no instrument were available, then someone would deddle the tune, or sing puirt-a-beul, the old Gaelic dancing-songs, often to the accompaniment of a Jew’s harp or paper-and-comb” (1964:38), at least suggesting a precedent for the frequent use of instrumental accompaniment today.

It is perhaps too categorical to insist that puirt-a-beul were sung either accompanied or unaccompanied. If the voice plays the role of an instrument, as the term “puirt-a-beul” indicates, then it is at least plausible that voice and instrument might have combined during performance. Although it might be argued that no one, other than the Fletts, have documented that puirt-a-beul were sung to instrumental accompaniment, it is also true that performances of puirt-a-beul have not generally been recorded or discussed at all, accompanied or not. However, the instrumental accompaniment of puirt-a-beul, if

practised, was probably not widespread. At least some consultants would likely have remembered and told of such instances.

Whatever the historical performance of puirt-a-beul, singers today may choose and arrange their accompaniment. Of course, there are those who would prefer that puirt-a-beul remain unaccompanied. As mentioned, Jamie MacNeil believes that instrumental accompaniment offers a “way out” for singers who do not wish to (or cannot) contend with the difficulties of performing puirt-a-beul unaccompanied. Catriona Parsons likes singer Mary Smith’s puirt-a-beul recordings because “there’s no accompaniment” and therefore “you can make out the words of the puirt-a-beul beautifully, clear as can be.” Catriona’s concerns focus on the clarity of the lyrics rather than on the accompaniment itself.

There are those who believe that some accompaniment is acceptable. Margo Carruthers argues that, “the accompaniment [on my CD, *Tàlant nam Bàrd*,] ... is tasteful. The vocals are right up top—they’re never lost. Every syllable is there, flawed and all! Every single one is there.” Margo almost answers Catriona’s concern for lyric clarity: the accompaniment on *Tàlant nam Bàrd* is acceptable since it does not interfere with the lyrics.

Rosemary McCormack, producer of *Tàlant nam Bàrd*, explained that

with any traditional songs, traditional music, there’s a line that you cross and when you cross that line, it’s no longer traditional music. It becomes something else. And sometimes that line is very hard to define. You have to know the tradition very well, I think, to know whether you’ve crossed over the line I don’t particularly want our stuff to cross that line.

She added that although she has some problems with The Rankin Family's Gaelic pronunciation, she likes what they have done with the music:

with the arrangements and the singing, there's very little that they change of how the song, to the traditional ear, should sound. They are adding things in the accompaniment and in the arrangements they are doing musically but they are not very often changing the rhythm or the timing or the sense of the songs that they're doing.

For Rosemary, chordal accompaniment and arrangements are acceptable. She seems only to disagree with arrangements that alter the rhythm and tempo of the songs. Fundamental to the acceptance of a port-a-beul performance as "traditional" is lyric clarity.

Christine Primrose, of Lewis in Scotland, was of a similar mind:

I think if [arrangement] is done with a bit of thought behind it, if people are sort of aware of the music to the extent that they know if they're going to put accompaniment—Because, essentially what people have to remember is that there isn't one Gaelic song that I do that really needs accompaniment. Those songs never needed accompaniment at all. So when you start accompanying them, you've got to be really sure that you're enhancing the actual song, that you're not taking away from it.

In other words, the traditional song should remain the focus of any arrangement, rather than become one equal musical part amongst many, which is typical of current popular music.

Finally, there are those who believe that a considerable amount of accompaniment and arrangement is acceptable. Mary Jane Lamond said,

Some people are really just traditionalists and I just don't happen to be. I love this tradition. I have a great deal of respect for it. But for me the question was, can it be done to put modern instruments with this and still be respectful of the songs and not ruin them. And it's a challenge.

Both Mary Jane Lamond and The Barra MaceNeils include highly arranged versions of puirt-a-beul on their albums (e.g., “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” on *Suas e!*, and “Am Pige Ruadh” on *Until Now* and *Closer to Paradise*, respectively). Their puirt-a-beul include the fragmentation of lyrical lines, electronic manipulation of the voice, newly-composed lyrics, and tempo alterations, amongst other elements. Whereas Margo Carruthers was most concerned that the lyrics be in the foreground at all times, Mary Jane Lamond and The Barra MacNeils are more interested in the musical and artistic possibilities of puirt-a-beul. Since Mary Jane Lamond’s and The Barra MacNeils’ audiences extend well beyond the confines of Cape Breton, they must create music relevant to non-Gaelic speakers and therefore Gaelic lyrics are not necessarily emphasized.

Despite complex performance issues and choices, some consultants argued that puirt-a-beul are relatively easy to learn. Jamie MacNeil believes that puirt-a-beul are found on more and more albums because they’re “easier to learn” since “there’s usually no more than three verses to them so if they can manage to learn these three verses, they can keep repeating them.” The accessible vocabulary and repetitive lyrics make them easy to remember and therefore suitable for language beginners. However, the ease with which puirt-a-beul may be learned does not ensure their quality performance.

Consultants’ beliefs regarding the ease with which puirt-a-beul may be learned and performed are important to understanding their attitudes towards puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapter 6.6). The simpler a consultant considered puirt-a-beul, the more likely s/he was

to feel negatively about them. On the other hand, the more a consultant acknowledged the complexities of puirt-a-beul, the more s/he respected them as a song genre.

For all that puirt-a-beul may appear simple in terms of their repetitive lyrics and basic vocabulary, there are many complex issues related to their performance. Aside from physical issues of breathing, tempo, rhythm, and enunciation, there are aesthetic choices to be made regarding the arrangement of puirt-a-beul for performance. All of these are issues with which anyone who sings puirt-a-beul publicly must struggle, and the choices they make are indicators of their attitudes toward puirt-a-beul as well as their visions of the future of Gaelic culture: whether it should remain traditional and community-oriented or whether it should shift to reflect modern tastes and technology.

6.4 Purpose

My consultants agreed that puirt-a-beul is vocalized dance music, used to accompany dancing in the absence of instruments. However, the purpose of puirt-a-beul is not reducible merely to dance accompaniment. Puirt-a-beul's purposes are as numerous as the people who sing them. Purpose can only be defined situationally, depending on the singer, the audience, the venue and so on.

(a) Dance

Since puirt-a-beul is invariably described as dance music, it is logical to start by documenting how and when puirt-a-beul accompanies dance. Most scholars and

consultants alike explained that puirt-a-beul would be sung when no instrumentalists were available to play. When this practice first began is uncertain (cf. Chapter 6.1) but it has certainly been documented over the past century. In *Carmina Gadelica* (1900), Alexander Carmichael describes a dance called “Cailleach an Dudain” and specifies that the tune “is played by a piper or a fiddler, or sung as a ‘port-a-bial,’ mouth tune, by a looker-on, or by the performers themselves. The air is quaint and irregular, and the words are curious and archaic” (Vol I:207).

K.N. MacDonald (1931) calls puirt-a-beul “ancient dancing songs ... [which are] evidently the first attempts at applying music to the art of dancing” (iv). Frances Tolmie defines puirt-a-beul as “vocal tunes for dancing or quick movement” (1910-1913:147). John Shaw writes, “In Cape Breton, it was common for people to step-dance to puirt-a-beul as well as instrumental music; in Joe Neil’s words, ‘chuireadh iad feadhainn a dhannsa le puirt-a-beul,’ ‘They would get people dancing with mouth music’” (1992/3:44).⁸ Some of the tunes’ names themselves indicate a connection to dance, such as the “Ruidhlidh na Coilich Dubha,” or “The Black Cock’s Reel.”

Even within recent memory puirt-a-beul have been used to accompany dance. Rhoda MacRitchie recalled puirt-a-beul accompanying Scottish country dancing and wedding dances prior to her immigration to Canada in 1967. In Cape Breton, Jeff MacDonald remembered an occasion on which puirt-a-beul was required as the fiddler for a dance was detailed:

⁸ Although Dr. Shaw does not specify a time frame, Joe Neil MacNeil (1908-1996) clearly indicates that puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dancing during his lifetime.

[a woman from Queensville] went to a dance in a schoolhouse and the fiddler couldn't make it because of a snowstorm so she got up on a chair and sang puirt-a-beul for the first figure of the set. And then [another woman] stood up and sang puirt-a-beul for the second figure. I don't know how often that was [done] but obviously it wasn't something completely foreign.

Jeff is in his mid-20s; therefore, this event likely took place within the last ten years. Jeff MacDonald also accompanied a young woman's step dancing at a Christmas Island *fêis* concert (July 24, 1998). At another *fêis* concert, it was announced that Willie Fraser would sing puirt-a-beul to accompany his granddaughter's step dancing, although in actual fact, he jiggled the tune of "Am Muilean Dubh" rather than singing the puirt-a-beul lyrics (fieldnotes August 15, 1998).

Despite the documentation that puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dancing, a large question remains: what kind of dance? In Cape Breton, it is argued that puirt-a-beul have always been used to accompany step dancing, a form of dancing which was supposed to have come to Canada with the Scottish emigrants of the 19th century. Frank Rhodes argues:

Although [Cape Breton step dancing] is unlike that seen at modern Scottish Highland Games, there is no doubt that the Cape Breton Island solo dances originated in Scotland, and indeed some of these dances can be shown on internal evidence alone to be related to solo dances which can still be found in the Scottish Highlands and the Outer Isles. ... When the solo dances taught by the dancing teachers began to be forgotten, extemporized stepping of a form similar to that used in the Cape Breton Island Reels came to be used in place of the solo dances in exhibitions and competitions, so that until very recent years the dancing on these occasions was quite dissimilar in style to that seen on similar occasions within living memory in Scotland. ... Many people in Cape Breton Island have doubted the Scottish origin of the stepping, and either have considered it to be an importation from Virginia or have attributed it to the French settlers from Louisburg or later non-Scottish immigrants. While all these factors may have had some influence on the present-day style, it is certain that the roots of the step-

dancing lie in the solo dances and reel steps which were brought from Scotland early in the nineteenth century (1964:272-3).

Cape Breton step dancing no longer exists in Scotland. Some have questioned whether Cape Breton step dancing is actually a form of Irish step dancing, which it resembles more closely than anything in Scotland: “[Step dancing] was so completely forgotten [in Scotland] that many people at first mistakenly assumed that Cape Breton step dancing was derived from Irish dancing” (Dunlay 1996:5). But Cape Bretoners are adamant that step dancing can be traced to the earliest emigrants. Recently, Scots have begun to accept that Cape Breton step dancing is a lost Scottish dance form (cf. *Cape Breton Ceilidh* by Allister MacGillivray) and Cape Breton step dancers have been invited to Scotland to teach step dancing there (cf. *Am Bràighe* Autumn 1996:17 and Doherty 1996:17).

My one major problem with the theory that puirt-a-beul are meant to accompany step dancing is that, while the majority of puirt-a-beul are in fact strathspeys and reels, there a small number of jigs as well. Cape Breton step dancing is only danced to strathspeys and reels. What, then, is the purpose of jigs in the repertoire? Furthermore, Jackie Dunn, a fiddler and step dancer, said that in terms of step dancing, “there’s certain tunes that are better than others, especially the strathspeys” (interview with author, August 3, 1998). Why are some strathspeys better for dancing than others? Perhaps the dance steps have altered over time or perhaps some compositions were simply not as good as others. On the other hand, perhaps they were never meant to accompany step dancing in the first place.

Some of my consultants (such as Maxie MacNeil and Jeff MacDonald) indicated that puirt-a-beul might have accompanied Cape Breton square dancing. Cape Breton square sets are indigenous to Cape Breton, combining Scottish set dance steps with Canadian square dance steps, to form a unique corpus of dances. The square sets I learned used jigs and reels extensively, but no strathspeys. Because the existing puirt-a-beul repertoire is dominated by strathspeys and reels with only a few jigs, it seems likely that puirt-a-beul would have been used to accompany set dancing only infrequently. Furthermore, as many scholars and consultants have noted, puirt-a-beul require considerable breath control and stamina. It would be very difficult for any single person to accompany a full square set. It would also be difficult for the dancers to hear the singer(s) over the sounds of the dancing. Doherty actually documents that before electronic amplification, at least two fiddlers would play at a dance in order to be heard (1996:115). Finally, if puirt-a-beul are best used to accompany square sets in Cape Breton, what did they accompany in Scotland?

Scots believe that puirt-a-beul accompanied other types of dances, such as set dances. Kenna Campbell argues that specific puirt-a-beul were used to accompany specific dances, which, in her mind, explains why some puirt-a-beul involving intricate cross-rhythms. These particular dances have since been lost. The cross-rhythms would have highlighted a particular step or step sequence. The same arguments hold for this situation as for the accompaniment of Cape Breton square sets. Additionally, if puirt-a-beul were used to accompany Scottish set dances, then how did puirt-a-beul come to

accompany either square sets or step dancing in Cape Breton? Unfortunately, little is documented regarding the earliest Cape Breton dances.

One consultant, Janet Buchanan, even recounted how she sang puirt-a-beul to accompany Scottish highland dancing. Perhaps puirt-a-beul have continued to exist and function in both Cape Breton and Scotland because of their flexibility: they may be adapted for many kinds of dance accompaniment. Indeed, it is possible that puirt-a-beul were composed without any particular type of dance in mind. Fiddle and pipe tunes, upon which puirt-a-beul are supposedly modelled, are not always composed with dancing in mind either.

It seems unquestionable that puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dancing at one time, but it remains uncertain whether puirt-a-beul were intended to accompany a particular type of dance? If that mystery were explained, a lot more would be understood about the origins and transmission process of puirt-a-beul.

(b) Satire and Humour

Given that puirt-a-beul were composed to accompany dancing, what kinds of lyrics were used? Many puirt-a-beul employ vocables but I am not aware of any puirt-a-beul that use vocables exclusively. Many puirt-a-beul “deal chiefly with simple social incidents, mainly humorous” (Mackintosh 1916:6). Jim Watson remarked, “I think they were a great vehicle for people to make high spirited comments about things that just allowed them to laugh and without attaching anything too serious to the rest of them.”

One example was referred to by Kenna Campbell in her radio interview. She discussed the satirical port-a-beul, “Tha Biodag air MacThomais:”

Tha biodag air mac Thomais,
Tha biodag air mac Thomais,
Tha biodag air mac Thomais,
Gur math gu foghnadh sgian dha.

Mac Thomas wears a dirk now,
Mac Thomas wears a dirk now,
Mac Thomas wears a dirk now,
A knife would suit him better.

Tha biodag anns a’ ghliogadaich
Air mac a’ bhodaich leibidich;
Na’m biodh e mar a thigeadh dha,
Gur math gu foghnadh sgian dha.

A dirk that is a dangling one
Is on the silly old man’s son;
And were he as he ought to be
A knife would suit him better.

Lyrics and translation by Donald A. Fergusson (1978:254-5).

This particular port-a-beul immortalizes a man who put on airs; the song satirizes the pretentious attire he wore.

Although many consultants were sceptical that puirt-a-beul continue to be written in this century, some recent compositions have been documented. They generally commemorate an amusing situation. Bruford writes of Donald MacColl of Acharacle, a twentieth-century bard about whom Bruford wished to publish a book, who “made some fine puirt-a-beul, adapting the tunes and refrains from known mouth tunes to mildly satirical words about some local character” (Bruford “Gaelic Bards” 1979:9).

In a similar vein, Jim Watson, a Gaelic scholar living in Cape Breton, suggested that Cape Breton puirt-a-beul might be composed by substituting local names and events in pre-existing puirt-a-beul:

I think that folk singing, Gaelic folk singing, there’s a certain element of improvisation in it anyway and if it meant taking the words to a song, let’s say a lot of these puirt, and substituting a name here and there, or someone who was known locally, or altering it a little bit so that it referred to something local. I

notice there's a port for King George [a fiddle tune] which I got the other day which talks about [tree] stumps in it. Quite obviously, this is a reference to something that they wouldn't have in Scotland so—now, how much of that is of Scottish origin and how much is of Cape Breton origin is hard to say.

In the Western Isles of Scotland, there are almost no trees due to the soil, climate and winds. One of the first Cape Breton songs—and one of the most famous—is “A’ Choille Ghruamach” or “The Gloomy Forest,” which describes the Gaels’ feelings of fright and of being overwhelmed by the density of the unfamiliar forests. Therefore, in Jim’s example, the tune can be traced to Scotland, but the reference to tree stumps is likely a Cape Breton addition.

Rosemary McCormack played field recordings of Cape Breton puirt-a-beul at a Gaelic song workshop on August 20, 1998. These songs also appear to be satires of local people:

Pieigi Dhomhnail ‘ic Thearlaich,	Peggy, daughter of Donald, son of Charles
Gur laghach i ‘s gur lurach i;	She’s so nice and so pleasant,
Pieigi Dhomhnail ‘ic Thearlaich,	Peggy, daughter of Donald, son of Charles
Gur laghach i ‘s gur lurach i;	She’s so nice and so pleasant,
Gur iomadh rud a theireadh i	There’s many a thing she would say
B’e rud a cheileadh a bhiodh ann.	And it would be all gossip.

Lyrics collected from the singing of John Rory MacNeil, Barra Glen and translated by Rosemary McCormack

The subjects of the songs are likely long-dead or the singers would not risk recording them. Composition of puirt-a-beul could be more widespread than commonly accepted; the songs simply may not be passed on to many people for fear of the songs’ subjects hearing them. In addition, these songs about locals might not make sense or be of interest

to community outsiders and this would also help to explain why puirt-a-beul composition may be “underground.” In addition, some Cape Breton puirt-a-beul were not as easy to sing as some others. For example, in the port-a-beul collected by Rosemary McCormack (see above), some of the word combinations (i.e., *laghach* and *lurach*) are particularly difficult to enunciate quickly. The difficulty of certain puirt-a-beul might also have prevented their quick transmission within the larger community.

A number of people have also commented on the large number of bawdy puirt-a-beul (Jeff MacDonald; Neil John Gillis; Jim Watson; and Bruford, “Gaelic Lullabies,” 1978:7). All refused to sing them for me. Jeff remarked that,

If we were having this conversation in Gaelic, it [would be] different. Anytime I’d be speaking to older women and that, you speak—it’s a different conversation. Like, there’s different rules of conduct in Gaelic than in English. Someone could say, an old fellow could say something in Gaelic and you’d kind of be like, “Holy jeez, you’re bad.” And if you came out with the same words in English, you’d say, “You’re a dirty old pervert.” Because of just limitations being put down by language.

Even though I assured Jeff that I would not judge him for his bawdy puirt-a-beul, he refused, saying, “I’d be breaking that tradition there and I wouldn’t feel comfortable with it.” Jeff promised me that he would give me the bawdy lyrics once I become a fluent Gaelic speaker. He is concerned about issues of translation, both literally and in terms of cultural values. Jim Watson expressed similar concerns:

With the disappearance of Gaelic—because a lot of these puirt are bawdy—with the disappearance of Gaelic and the predominance of English being spoken in the households, and the whole morality, the whole standards of social acceptability implicit in English—my guess is that lots of people stopped singing those puirt or substantial numbers of them because they were no longer socially acceptable.

In the spirit of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), bawdy puirt-a-beul acted as a social release valve in a repressive society. Bawdy puirt-a-beul likely emerged in response to the restrictions of the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches. Many probably articulated resistance to the social order in which they were conceived. As church restrictions were dropped, bawdy puirt-a-beul were no longer necessary.

While I do not have actual bawdy texts, even the existence of bawdy puirt-a-beul raises some questions. First, none of my Scottish consultants mentioned the bawdy puirt-a-beul, only my Cape Breton consultants. One immigrant from Scotland now living in Cape Breton commented on the bawdy nature of puirt-a-beul. However, I am uncertain whether she encountered them in Scotland or only in Cape Breton. Is it possible that bawdy puirt-a-beul are restricted to Cape Breton? Second, how is it that puirt-a-beul, if so many are indeed bawdy, have become associated with children and how have they come to be used within the classroom (cf. 6.4.e and h)?

If bawdy puirt-a-beul also exist in Scotland, it is also important to query how puirt-a-beul were censored and/or selected for published collections, such as K.N. MacDonald's and, more recently, *Eilean Fraoich*. It is possible that academic publications of puirt-a-beul canonized the non-bawdy segment of repertoire. Puirt-a-beul in general are absent from early Gaelic song collections, such as *An t-Oranaiche*. This could be explained by their bawdiness. On the other hand, as dance songs, puirt-a-beul tunes are at least as important as their lyrics, and since most early song collections printed

only the lyrics without the tune—presumably due to printing costs—puirt-a-beul lyrics may not have been considered worthwhile publishing.

It is strange that the puirt-a-beul repertoire has been divided so strongly between the hundreds of non-bawdy puirt-a-beul that I have discovered in various sources, and the unknown numbers of bawdy puirt-a-beul hardly to be found at all. Not only are these repertoires divided along lyrical lines but, by necessity, along lines of function and usage (cf. Chapter 6.4.h).

(c) Fiddle Tunes

Although, or perhaps because, puirt-a-beul are defined as dance songs, they have been considered an important means of transmitting fiddle tunes. Jackie Dunn writes that “it is common knowledge among the older generations that the first fiddlers in Cape Breton learned their tunes from puirt-a-beul versions” (1991:16). John Shaw concurs, writing that puirt-a-beul

have often served as a device for musical instruction, recalling the earlier *canntaireachd* of the piping schools. In the 30s the well-known fiddler Bill Lamey, raised by Gaelic-speaking parents as an English-speaking monoglot in River Denys, Inverness Co., wished to learn fiddle. His mother was not a musician but introduced him to the ‘correct’ style, along with a large number of tunes, through puirt-a-beul—that is, by oral transmission. More recently a younger non-Gaelic-speaker, now viewed by Gaels as a successful exponent of the older fiddle style, consulted Lauchie MacLellan for the port-a-beul versions of tunes in order to gain a better understanding of the music (1992/3:44).

Virginia Garrison, whose Ph.D. dissertation explores how traditional Cape Breton fiddling is taught, found, “Almost all fiddlers interviewed expressed their strong desire as

youngsters to learn to play the fiddle. A number of factors which seemed to kindle this desire to learn included ... the mother's influence as a singer of Gaelic songs and by 'jigging' fiddle tunes" (1985:180). Of the fiddlers she interviewed, nearly eighty percent

reported that as a beginning fiddler they were totally dependent on their aural skills—their ear—for learning. Opportunities for these young players to develop their aural skills were many. Those reported included ... listening to relatives and non-relatives sing Gaelic songs, or sing nonsense syllables in vocal renditions of fiddle tunes, a practice known in Cape Breton as 'jigging,' and making 'mouth-music' (1985:185).

Fiddler Natalie MacMaster's grandmother, Maggie Ann Beaton, used to encourage Natalie to play tunes by jigging them for her (cf. *Am Bràighe* winter 1994/5:8-9).

Elizabeth Doherty recounts, "Kyle MacNeil acknowledges puirt-a-beul, as practiced by his mother, Jean MacNeil, as his initial source of tunes—'she would jig them to me'"

(1996:177). Moreover, puirt-a-beul are associated with the "blas na Gàidhlig" or

"Gaelic flavour" said to be in a good fiddler's playing. John Shaw suggests that this

Gaelic flavour may in part be a result of the influence of puirt-a-beul on fiddle playing.

According to Jackie Dunn, "since fiddlers learned their tunes from mouth music versions

then rhythmic patterns and natural accents of the language would have been adopted by

the fiddlers. This may possibly be what is meant by a fiddler making his fiddle 'speak'

Gaelic" (1991:20). Elizabeth Doherty notes that

several tunes with corresponding Gaelic words were transferred to the fiddle, ensuring in the process that a certain amount of correctness was maintained by the fiddler Inflections of the language were absorbed along with the tunes. It is these inflections that largely constitute the Gaelic expression as it shapes the fiddle style (1996:305-6).

However, while it is common to hear Cape Bretoners distinguish between fiddlers who play with the flavour and those who do not, no one has been able to define it and Shaw, Dunn and Doherty are only able to speculate that puirt-a-beul may be the key to understanding it.

My own interviews did not reveal that puirt-a-beul are or were used to transmit fiddle tunes. However, the majority of my consultants are singers rather than fiddlers. Still, Sandy Cameron, a native Gaelic-speaking fiddler and one of my consultants, explained that he had generally learned fiddle tunes first before learning their corresponding lyrics: “See, I took interest in the books, you know, when I was getting the books with all the tunes in them. I wasn’t thinking about the Gaelic language.” Jackie Dunn, another fiddler although not a Gaelic speaker, also denied having learned tunes by means of puirt-a-beul.

It is also significant that Garrison discovered that while some Cape Breton fiddlers may have learned to play fiddle from puirt-a-beul, amongst the new (i.e., in 1979) fiddlers, “no student mentioned having learned from their mother’s singing” and “no fiddle class student, in describing how he or she remembered tunes, mentioned ‘jigging’ them” (1985:234, 235). Doherty corroborated Garrison’s statements: “The primary sources for the earlier generations of fiddlers—puirt-a-beul and the Highland bagpipe repertory—are rarely referred to directly [today]” (1996:176).

While puirt-a-beul were strongly associated with the transmission of fiddle tunes in Cape Breton, I have not read or heard of a similar association in Scotland. Perhaps this

function of puirt-a-beul only developed amongst new emigrants to Cape Breton, who may have been musically illiterate or who may not have had access to printed music collections. Although some Scottish immigrants brought their published music collections with them, or bought them once established in Canada, many fiddlers did not have access to printed sources until relatively recently, with the reissues of *The Skye Collection* in 1979 and *The Airs and Melodies Peculiar to Scotland the Isles* in 1982 (*Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, s.v. Fiddling:Style and Technique: Cape Breton style). Furthermore, while some early fiddlers may have been able to read music, by no means were they all musically literate.

It may also be that the connection between puirt-a-beul and fiddle tune transmission developed alongside the strong Gaelic aesthetic expressed by Cape Breton tradition-bearer Joe Neil MacNeil, who is said to have often repeated that “music is language and language is music” (fieldnotes, January 15, 1998). Jamie MacNeil expressed similar sentiments when he claimed that language is the “warp and woof” of any culture. Frances MacEachen also described the interconnected nature of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Based on such an aesthetic, it makes sense that instrumentalists could and should learn to play from songs, learning the tunes’ rhythms from the rhythm of the language in the puirt-a-beul lyrics. It also follows that fiddlers are not as likely to learn their tunes from puirt-a-beul now that the Gaelic language is in serious decline. Native Gaelic speaking puirt-a-beul bearers from whom fiddlers might learn their tunes are

virtually non-existent. The same aesthetic which links language and music has resulted in the use of puirt-a-beul in the classroom (cf. Chapter 6.4.h).

In an interesting reversal of the past, Mary Jane Lamond verified puirt-a-beul tunes by listening to fiddlers:

Some [puirt-a-beul], it's hard to put the actual fiddle tune to it and because the singers, the informants are elderly, it's not very in tune a lot of time so their tuning isn't great and the tune isn't very clear. And so I'd have to find enough of a clue in those tunes to get a fiddle player to tell me what tunes they are, to play it for me on the fiddle so I could learn the melody.

Stephanie Conn also spoke of listening to fiddle tunes in order to reconstruct the way in which puirt-a-beul lyrics fit with their melodies. The transmission process has reversed from singer-fiddler to fiddler-singer.

When presenting a paper on the subject of puirt-a-beul to a Celtic Studies conference (July 26, 1999), several scholars argued that puirt-a-beul are considered "low" on the song hierarchy because they are not true songs. These scholars argued that they are, in fact, fiddle tunes and therefore have far more importance to fiddlers than to singers, suggesting that, as with *canntaireachd*, fiddlers taught other fiddlers new tunes by singing puirt-a-beul. But this is not the case. Oral reports indicate that *non*-fiddlers (e.g., mothers) taught fiddlers tunes by singing puirt-a-beul. If puirt-a-beul are only of importance to fiddlers, why and how did these women learn puirt-a-beul? Again, the existence of bawdy puirt-a-beul also calls their sole use for fiddle tune transmission into question.

Although the majority of early fiddlers may not have been musically literate, there has been a high degree of musical literacy amongst fiddlers in Cape Breton since the 1940s (Doherty 1996:167-8). With so many literate musicians, the need for puirt-a-beul as a means of tune transmission diminished, as borne out by Garrison's dissertation. Or perhaps puirt-a-beul were used to augment the printed versions; in other words, the skeleton of the fiddle melody might be learned from paper but the details—such as rhythmic and tonal nuancing—might have been learned from hearing puirt-a-beul: “Written sources are never suggested as stylistic guides; rather the ear is encouraged consistently and promoted as the most important aspect of the tradition, with literacy being retained only as a support to that” (Doherty 1996:102). Richard Dorson argues that there is a difference between oral and literate culture, but he also acknowledges, “distinctions between traditional and nontraditional or between oral and written literature are often shifting and elusive” (1976:133). Clearly, the boundaries are blurred in Cape Breton, where fiddlers learn tunes from oral sources (other fiddlers, puirt-a-beul) but also from printed sources.

It is also significant that the stories I heard of puirt-a-beul being used to accompany dance in the absence of instruments involved singers, not fiddlers. If the fiddlers were present, they would be playing, not singing. So who were these people who knew enough puirt-a-beul to accompany step and possibly set dancing? From whom did they learn their puirt-a-beul? And if puirt-a-beul were truly considered to be the realm of fiddlers, why did these singers bother to learn puirt-a-beul themselves? If it was really

necessary for a singer to accompany a dance, why not simply jig the tunes, rather than sing actual puirt-a-beul?

My research has not revealed answers to these questions. However, it is clear that whether or not fiddlers sang and used puirt-a-beul in the past, puirt-a-beul are now rarely the domain of fiddlers and are instead more often a part of singers' repertoires.

(d) Labour Songs

Emmerson is the only scholar I have read who has called puirt-a-beul a "labour" song. Other songs that could be considered labour songs are rowing songs (*iorram*), milking songs, butter churning songs, and milling/waulking songs. Labour songs are so-called because they are sung to accompany work, including chores, both to pass the time and to keep the rhythm of the activity. Puirt-a-beul are not generally considered labour songs because they are understood to accompany the pleasurable activity of dancing.

Although none of my consultants described puirt-a-beul as a labour song, several consultants indicated that, at one time, puirt-a-beul were sung by women to accompany household chores. In response to an article I wrote for *The Inverness Oran*, one man talked of his grand-aunt's penchant for singing puirt-a-beul. I summarized our conversation in my fieldnotes:

Sara was always humming or singing Gaelic songs from morning until night and she sang a lot of puirt-a-beul. Greg Smith mentioned a few by name: "The Braes O Mar", the "High Road to Linton" and "The Devil in the Kitchen." He said that she usually accompanied her work with them: making biscuits, doing the laundry or washing the dishes. She usually had 7 or 8 verses for each tune and she also made sets out of the strathspeys and reels (fieldnotes July 17, 1998).

On the other hand, a number of my consultants, including Maxie MacNeil, Jamie MacNeil, Alice Freeman, Neil John Gillis, and Duncan MacLellan, said that they had never heard puirt-a-beul sung in their youth, although Jamie did say that he had heard his mother sing puirt-a-beul “a little bit, I suppose. She sang an awful lot about the home, either working or singing or both [but] ... not very often.” Roddie, Jamie’s brother, also remembered their mother and grandmother singing puirt-a-beul around the house: “it just seems as though it was the same thing over and over again.” But when I asked him if he remembered hearing puirt-a-beul, he replied, “Well, I can’t even remember. I’m trying to think. In other words, I never really learned it.” Roddie’s wife, Helen, believes that puirt-a-beul are more popular now than they were when she first came to Cape Breton in 1957.

Some consultants suggested that puirt-a-beul were sung by women in order to teach their children how to dance at home. Beth MacNeil suggested that

it seems like in Cape Breton, what kept puirt-a-beul alive basically would've been mothers with their children, maybe even grandmothers with children, in the house, the little ditties. Maybe they were just carrying on a little bit and step dancing around the kitchen.

The Fletts indicate that puirt-a-beul were used similarly in Scotland: “in the winter evenings they used to dance with their brothers and sisters in the kitchen of their croft, while their parents sang puirt-a-beul for them” (1964:160). John Shaw wrote, “people also regularly jigged tunes unaccompanied at home for children to dance to” (1992/3:44).

This connection of puirt-a-beul with women and the house, rather than the public sphere of dance halls, demonstrates a transition in the historical use and purpose of puirt-a-beul. Several consultants proposed that the reason for the decreased presence of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton Gaelic culture was the increase in the number of fiddlers. If puirt-a-beul were indeed used to accompany dances in the absence of instruments, then as fiddlers became more common, the need for puirt-a-beul would have diminished. It is possible that as puirt-a-beul were no longer necessary in the public sphere, they began to be used in the private sphere instead.

This would also explain how puirt-a-beul came to transmit fiddle tunes. Although I am not aware of any explicit rules preventing women from playing the fiddle, the reality is that, until recently, fiddlers were predominantly men (cf. Doherty 1996:115), and if women involved themselves in music, it was as piano accompanists. Perhaps puirt-a-beul gave women the means of participating in the male-dominated fiddle culture. They may not have played fiddle themselves, but they were capable of transmitting fiddle tunes via puirt-a-beul.

One must also consider that women no longer had milling songs for themselves, as they had had in Scotland. It has been documented that many Scottish waulking songs detail women's experiences and perspectives (cf. Ross 1957; and Campbell and Collinson 1969). Once men became involved in the milling process in Cape Breton, women needed to find another means of expressing their concerns, issues, and problems. It is possible that bawdy puirt-a-beul became that means. Once women were free to become fiddlers,

establish careers, and generally had more occupational and leisure options available to them, they no longer needed bawdy puirt-a-beul as a release from social pressures. It is perhaps relevant that one female consultant recounted how a woman recently sang a bawdy port-a-beul about urinating on a fire to her, an instance of one woman singing a bawdy port-a-beul to another woman (fieldnotes, January 15, 1998).

The use of puirt-a-beul by women for domestic purposes may also help to explain the negative attitude towards puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapter 6.6). Relegated to private performance, they no longer served the community at large. They became inconsequential within the culture. I cannot corroborate this with my research, but it would not be surprising if this attitude, if actually in existence, were kept quiet, especially to an outsider and a woman such as myself. It is perhaps also relevant that the large majority of contemporary singers who choose to record puirt-a-beul are women: Mary Jane Lamond, Lucy MacNeil (of The Barra MacNeils), the women of The Rankin Family, Margo Carruthers, Catherine Ann MacPhee, Christine Primrose, Mairi MacInnes, Mary Smith, Karen Matheson (of Capercaillie), Eilidh MacKenzie, and Talitha MacKenzie. In any case, it is again interesting to note that since puirt-a-beul became a private women's song type, they have again become a public performance song type.

It is difficult to define puirt-a-beul as "labour songs" with any certainty as this use of puirt-a-beul is supported by little documentation. In general, this use of puirt-a-beul seems to go unrecognized, as only Emmerson has ever defined puirt-a-beul specifically as labour songs, rather than as dance songs. Further research would be required to

understand this part of puirt-a-beul's history although it may be too late to gather much information as many of the Gaelic-speaking women who would have sung them in the past have already passed away.

(e) Children's Songs

With the association of puirt-a-beul with women in the home, it follows that puirt-a-beul are also sometimes considered children's songs. Even though John Shaw said that he was unaware of any Gaelic songs labelled specifically as children's songs (personal communication, July 30, 1999), and despite puirt-a-beul's usual definition as dance music, a number of people associated puirt-a-beul with children. Frances Tolmie recalled that "our nurse, Kate M'Swein, used to sing puirt-a-beul to us little ones" (1910-1913:146). Christine Primrose had never seen anyone dance to puirt-a-beul but she explained that:

[puirt-a-beul] started, or developed, in the home, a lot of them, making up wee ditty songs, you know, sort of using—especially when they have children on their knee. I know that they're called dandling songs, officially, but I remember my Granny, she'd have wee kids on her knee and she'd be singing to them. Maybe a verse or two of [sings a verse of the puirt-a-beul, "M'eudail air mo shuilean donna"], things like that. That's the kind of song that I always remember being associated with children, being on their knee and dandled on their knee.

Rhoda recounted a similar situation. While Christine and Rhoda are both Scots, Anna MacKinnon gave me a tape of a Cape Breton ceilidh that included a father singing his child to sleep with puirt-a-beul (fieldnotes, June 23, 1998). David Livingston-Lowe explained that he teaches puirt-a-beul to his adult Gaelic learners because

I feel that as adult learners, we're playing a little bit of catch-up. The children's songs are songs that children know so it's good to know them. ... So we do silly songs like, "S ann an Ìle," and "Brochan Lom." Partly because they're part of that children's musical vocabulary but also because they're simple and easy to learn.

I know "S ann an Ìle" and "Brochan Lom" as puirt-a-beul. The highly repetitive lyrics and basic vocabulary make puirt-a-beul easier for a child to sing than the sophisticated vocabulary of other Gaelic song types.

As described in Chapter 5.2, Beth MacNeil connected the association of puirt-a-beul and children's songs with the lack of interest in puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton:

I think [puirt-a-beul] was looked at—even when you sing a lot of the good ones, like a lot of them are kind of almost like nursery rhyme type things. So, as English-speaking adults, we don't go around singing "Mary Had a Little Lamb." There's all the little tunes and nursery rhyme things you learn as a child and when you get to be an adult, you certainly wouldn't get on stage and sing any one of them. People would really give you an odd look, I think, unless you were specifically there to entertain children. ... The [people] here that you talk to, they've only heard it as children so therefore you only sang it as a child. So, when you grow up, most people like to very quickly leave behind the things that dub you as being a child. So I mean, if people in Cape Breton back in the bygone days were learning puirt-a-beul at their mother's knee and as little kids playing around outside—little games or whatever—Well, once they wanted to be treated as adults, maybe right away they just dropped the puirt-a-beul.

While Beth's theory makes a certain amount of sense, why, then, did other Cape Bretoners such as Maxie MacNeil, Alice Freeman (whose father was a native Gaelic speaker and singer), Neil John Gillis, and Duncan MacLellan not hear puirt-a-beul when they were children. At best, it can be inferred that puirt-a-beul were sung by or for the children of an earlier generation.

The association of puirt-a-beul with children becomes even stranger when one recalls the bawdy puirt-a-beul repertoire. However, folklorists speculate that “the games and verbal lore of childhood were relics of adult traditions fallen into disrepair” (Factor 1988:11). Opie and Opie argue that children are usually incapable of creating a memorable rhyme and therefore “it is, perhaps, only to be expected that the most memorable verses should turn out to be the work of professional humorists and song-writers” (1959:13-14). In other words, puirt-a-beul may not have been intended for children when first composed, but as they lost relevance for adults, they became part of children’s lore. Even bawdy texts can become part of children’s folk domain: “we must expect some earthiness, not to say ribaldry—not to say plain vulgarity—in the earliest versions of some of the rhymes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, adults were far less squeamish about what was fit for children’s ears than they are today” (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 1962:12 n2).

(f) Entertainment: Commercial Recordings

I am particularly intrigued by the fact that a number of consultants dismissed puirt-a-beul or expressed ambivalent feelings about them (cf. Chapter 6.6). I attributed this to the fact that puirt-a-beul lyrics are quite simple and therefore of less interest to the fluent speaker than the more poetic song genres. This has led me to explore why puirt-a-beul continue to be performed and recorded despite being considered a minor and even negligible part of Cape Breton Gaelic song culture. My belief is that puirt-a-beul are an

effective marketing tool for both Cape Breton artists aiming at an audience beyond Cape Breton borders and for Gaelic culture at large, which is currently undergoing a revival.

Mary Jane Lamond declared that puirt-a-beul seem “like such a small little part of the whole big picture ... [which] I don’t think ... warrants a thesis.” Even so, the first single released from her album, *Suas E!*, was “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” a port-a-beul. In fact, of the eleven songs on *Suas E!*, an additional two are puirt-a-beul: “Dòmhnall mac ‘ic Iain” and “Bòg a’Lochain.” She also sings a set of three on her first album, *Bho Thìr nan Craobh*. If puirt-a-beul are such a small part of Gaelic culture, as she claims, why does she choose to record so many?

Unfortunately, I did not ask Mary Jane why she had chosen to record so many puirt-a-beul if she did not think highly of them. However, it is clear that they are appealing to non-Gaels because they are generally short, quick, and simple. They sound technically impressive; in fact, many consultants characterized puirt-a-beul as “tongue twisters.” Sung quickly, they sound quite extraordinary. One does not have to speak Gaelic to recognize a puirt-a-beul singer’s vocal capabilities. They rarely consist of more than two or three verses and a chorus which means that an audience’s attention can be maintained for the entire duration of the brief song, whereas an audience’s attention might wander during a longer, more involved Gaelic song, which often consist of upwards of 15 or 20 verses. Stephanie Conn, who sings puirt-a-beul with the Toronto-based group, Puirt-a-Baroque, said,

People like things that are fast and loud and high. ... Sometimes [puirt-a-beul] sounds harder than it is and sometimes it sounds as hard as it is and people think,

“Wow! How can you get all those words out?” And then maybe because it’s in a foreign tongue, people who aren’t Gaelic speakers are even more wowed by the mystery of it.

The generally repetitive lyrics and frequent vocables make it easy for an audience to pick up at least a few words or vocables, if they wish to sing along. In addition, the words are often silly or even nonsensical. The very term “puirt-a-beul,” literally translated as “tunes from the mouth,” indicates that the music is the prime consideration rather than the lyrics. After all, as emphasized at the beginning of this thesis, they are simply instrumental dance tunes played by the voice. Therefore one does not need to know Gaelic to appreciate them.

Puirt-a-beul may be employed as a marketing tool not only due to their inherent musical qualities which are attractive to a non-Gaelic audience, but also because they provide more artistic flexibility than other Gaelic song types. It may be that puirt-a-beul can be arranged and altered with less fear of recrimination from others within the culture. Because puirt-a-beul lyrics do not deal with serious topics and because the entire genre is not considered as important as other song types, such as “Great Songs” or milling songs, they can be manipulated with relative impunity. Considerable alteration of other song types is more likely to provoke controversy. For example, on *Suas e!*, the only songs with substantial instrumental preludes are the puirt-a-beul. The voice immediately begins almost every other song and when the voice does not immediately start, the prelude is minimal, merely creating an atmosphere or providing a drone for the voice. In addition, Mary Jane Lamond takes liberties with the form of the puirt-a-beul in “Dòmhnall mac ‘ic

Iain” and in “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean,” by breaking the lyrics up, overdubbing two sets of different lyrics, and altering tempos. All of the other songs are sung straight through. The puirt-a-beul tracks also incorporate the most “pop” elements, employing electric guitars, drums, synthesizers, and electronic manipulation of the voice. Thus, Mary Jane Lamond has more freedom to meld Gaelic song with pop elements and make her Gaelic song recordings appealing to a wide audience, one which includes more than Gaelic language learners and local Cape Bretoners.

Although puirt-a-beul are now often heard in a concert context, this was not always the case: “Years ago, I don’t remember hearing anybody singing puirt-a-beul at a concert. I can’t remember any 50 years ago” (Jamie MacNeil). Christine Primrose, who has recorded a number of albums and who teaches Gaelic song workshops in Scotland and North America, explained:

The puirt would never be sung in the concert situation [in Scotland in the past]. Unless they were very, very good at them, people. [The audiences] were wanting, as I said before, the slow, meaningful songs. And where I’ve heard [puirt-a-beul] is really when I started singing to the non-Gael. You know, when I started going to festivals and things like that, I said to the non-Gael, I had to become aware of the format of the program that I was doing. I had to make sure that the tempo of the songs varied in the concert performance I was doing. So that’s when I started becoming very aware of puirt-a-beul and seeking them out. Ones that I would know maybe the first part of the tune and wee bits of the second part of the tune, wee bits of the lyric and I started then to learn them properly so that I could actually perform them.

The concert has only recently become a viable performance venue for puirt-a-beul.

Commercial recordings too only recently began to feature Gaelic singers (with the

exception of John Allan Cameron) in addition to fiddlers, so puirt-a-beul recordings are relatively recent.

Historically, puirt-a-beul were not performed at concerts or on recordings but they certainly are now. In this respect, puirt-a-beul might be considered an invented tradition. There is a continuous tradition of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton but their context and function have changed over time. Hobsbawm explains that one way to understand an invented tradition is if “adaptation took place ... by using old models for new purposes” (1983:5). Puirt-a-beul may have once been used to accompany dance in the absence of instruments but there is no longer any need for it. There are plenty of musicians and recordings to accompany dancers at the present time. Instead, puirt-a-beul has been recontextualized. New venues of performance maintain the continuity of the puirt-a-beul repertoire.

Although it seems that puirt-a-beul have been sung in Cape Breton since the first immigrants arrived from Scotland, they have not always had the same purpose. In the process of being (re)invented, puirt-a-beul have contributed to the constantly changing definition of Cape Breton Gaelic identity. Featured on commercial recordings and at concerts, they serve as representations of the culture. Prominent as album “singles” and readily available, puirt-a-beul may come to represent Cape Breton Gaelic identity to cultural outsiders, whether Cape Bretoners intended puirt-a-beul to play such a role or not.

Although concert singers and recordings artists continue to define puirt-a-beul as dance music, it is actually used for different purposes in concert and recording contexts. Mary Jane Lamond invited her audience to dance to “Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean” at her Grand Narrows concert; no one did (fieldnotes, August 8, 1998). When puirt-a-beul are used to accompany dance at a concert or on a recording (a much less frequent occurrence because of the disembodiment of the dancer from the sound of the stepping), it is a staged event. Willie Fraser accompanied his and his granddaughters’ step dancing with puirt-a-beul, but it was performed as a spectacle (*Fèis an Eilein* concert, July 24, 1998). It was a deliberate performance rather than a spontaneous event. There was certainly no lack of fiddlers, so one could not say that puirt-a-beul were used in the absence of instruments. Jeff MacDonald sang puirt-a-beul to accompany the step dancing of Breagh MacDonald (no relation) at the July 10 *Fèis an Eilein* concert in order “to let people know they’re there and that.”

This deliberate inclusion of puirt-a-beul on recordings and concert programs corresponds to the increased viability of Cape Breton’s tourist industry. The Canso Causeway was built in 1955, connecting Cape Breton to the Nova Scotian mainland. The annual Broad Cove concert started in 1957, followed by the Highland Village Day concert in 1959, and then the Big Pond concert in 1964. The Rankin Family began to be widely recognized in 1989. Cape Breton established its own tourist board separate from Nova Scotia’s in January 1996. The Celtic Colours festival first came into existence

October 1997. The inclusion of puirt-a-beul on Cape Breton recordings and concert programs has helped to make Cape Breton's musical culture marketable.

(g) Programming

Now that it has been established that puirt-a-beul are used as a marketing tool, I will examine *how* they are used to best advantage by means of their programming. Puirt-a-beul are frequently found at the end of a concert program or at the end of a CD, as a "grand finale."

The flashiness and drama of puirt-a-beul are generally programmed with care. Puirt-a-beul are frequently found at the end of a concert program or at the end of a CD, as a "grand finale." For example, a concert presented by The Cape Breton Gaelic choir was divided into three sections, with intermissions between parts. The first two sections concluded with puirt-a-beul, and the penultimate piece of the third section was a set of puirt-a-beul, followed only by a traditional parting song. Puirt-a-beul were also used to conclude Margo Carruthers's CD release party (Fieldnotes, July 30) and Mary Jane Lamond concluded her concert at Grand Narrows in Cape Breton with "Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean: The Stepping Song," (Fieldnotes, August 8) the album single mentioned earlier.

Similarly, recordings also conclude with a flourish of puirt-a-beul. The Barra MacNeils conclude both *Until Now* and *Closer to Paradise* with the song, "Am Pige Ruadh" ("The Red Jar"). In fact, *Until Now* includes two versions of the song, with the second being a "bonus extended version." The Rankin Family also finish their self-titled

debut album with the “Jigging Medley,” which concludes with the port-a-beul, “Bodachan a’Mhirein.”

Christine Primrose, a native Gaelic speaker from Scotland and internationally recognized singer, explained why she sings puirt-a-beul despite her personal preference for other types of songs:

I find the more satisfying type of song to sing for me is a very emotional, highly charged song. That’s what I get the most satisfaction from singing. People would just be so depressed if they were to listen to me all the time with my choice of song. People don’t want to hear that all the time. When you start recording, you’ve got to have a slightly different approach. You can’t be totally selfish and self-centred about it. You’ve got to remember that people are out there. And to be honest, I think it’s good, when you are into recording a CD, to intersperse it with puirt-a-beul or something completely different rhythmic-wise. Because then people [think], “Oh, that’s nice and that’s got a great rhythm,” and you’re sort of clapping to it and whatever. And then you take them back into the “real” stuff, the real heavy music, the big music of the Gaelic song tradition.

Puirt-a-beul break the tension of more involved, serious songs. Their upbeat melodies and humorous lyrics provide the audience with an emotional release. Puirt-a-beul invite the audience to laugh, to clap, and to respond to the music. Not only do puirt-a-beul break any tension built up through preceding songs, but they also cleanse the palate, as it were, for songs to follow. While some recordings use puirt-a-beul as a “grand finale,” others incorporate puirt-a-beul in the middle of a recording, varying the pace of the songs.

Puirt-a-beul are not only programmed for the benefit of the audience, but also for the benefit of the singer. Stephanie pointed out that puirt-a-beul “are fun and they break up a night of singing a lot of long, difficult songs.” When Stephanie sings puirt-a-beul, she focuses on the music whereas in other songs, she concerns herself with the lyrics,

both remembering them and pronouncing them correctly. Puirt-a-beul also releases the singer's tension as much as the audience's and prepares him or her to sing the next serious song.

(h) Cultural Entry Point

While it seems clear that puirt-a-beul are an effective marketing tool, are Gaels "selling out" if they promote their culture using a song genre of little or no cultural value? Why does Mary Jane Lamond, who is committed to supporting and promoting Gaelic culture, include puirt-a-beul on her albums when she herself called them light, little, and not particularly serious? Why not spend all her time promoting the "real stuff," as Christine Primrose had put it? The answer may be that puirt-a-beul are the best means of attracting outsiders to the Gaelic culture. Puirt-a-beul could be considered a cultural entry point.

Obviously, non-Gaels are attracted to puirt-a-beul and find them accessible. Puirt-a-beul therefore offer an ideal means of enticing non-Gaels to explore Gaelic culture further. Perhaps non-Gaels intrigued with the music will visit the area, financially support Gaelic culture (i.e. buy a subscription to a Cape Breton Gaelic newspaper such as *Am Bràighe*, purchase a Gaelic song CD, etc.), or even learn the language. The greater the interest in Gaelic culture, the greater the political clout wielded by the Cape Breton Gaels when asking for government funding for Gaelic in the classroom, or for the production of Gaelic resources. I myself am a perfect example of the theory in practice.

My interest in puirt-a-beul has not only resulted in my MA thesis, but has also meant that I have continued learning Gaelic and even started teaching Gaelic in Toronto this year.

Puirt-a-beul are an ideal introduction to Gaelic culture because, in addition to being distinctly and identifiably Scots/Cape Breton Gaelic, they bridge the instrumental and singing traditions. The longtime and widespread popularity of Cape Breton fiddling⁹ and revival of PEI fiddling have only been strengthened by Ashley MacIsaac's 1995, "Sleepy Maggie." And since puirt-a-beul are simply fiddle tunes with words, an audience already well-acquainted with instrumental music may find that puirt-a-beul are at least somewhat familiar. Once non-Gaels are drawn to one type of Gaelic song, they could be induced to listen to (or even participate in) more.

For the same reasons that puirt-a-beul are marketable to a general audience, they are appealing to Gaelic learners and therefore are frequently used in the language classroom to teach basic vocabulary and grammar. Their simple, repetitive lyrics and short duration make puirt-a-beul an ideal pedagogical tool. My own Toronto Gaelic teacher used puirt-a-beul in his Saturday morning Gaelic interest classes because "they're simple and easy to learn. You can also pick apart some simple grammar from them." Puirt-a-beul bridge the gap between entertainment and language study. A Nova Scotian Gaelic teacher agreed:

Puirt are excellent learning tools not only because of repetitive vowels, consonants, words or phrases but also for breaking down barriers between students in a classroom setting. Mistakes are inevitable and equal. These

⁹ Cf. McKinnon's thesis, *Fiddling to Fortune: The Role of Commercial Recordings Made by Cape Breton Fiddlers in the Fiddle Music Tradition of Cape Breton Island*, 1989.

mistakes lead to laughter which relaxes the class so that they are free from self-consciousness very quickly (personal communication May 1999).

For this teacher, puirt-a-beul not only teach valuable language lessons, but also create an enjoyable learning atmosphere, where students will want to continue learning Gaelic culture. Because puirt-a-beul lyrics are humorous or nonsensical anyway, mistakes only add to the hilarity. On the other hand, mistakes would be considered graver in Gaelic song types involving more sober lyrics.

Christine Primrose also noted the accessibility of puirt-a-beul:

[Puirt-a-beul] comes across as this throwaway type song. So people don't feel so self-conscious when they're singing it. I feel that people who don't -- wouldn't consider themselves normally as, quote, "singers," they feel they can get off with singing a wee, this rhyme, sort of a ditty. A wee port, you know. A verse.

While other Gaelic song types appear to demand a competent singer and/or Gaelic speaker, Christine argues that puirt-a-beul, as a minor song genre, are less intimidating. If someone were to sing puirt-a-beul badly, it would only contribute to its farcical nature.

Although I have argued that puirt-a-beul promote Gaelic culture, whether they are performed on stage, on a recording, or in a classroom, there are those who argue that puirt-a-beul, particularly when adapted to a pop music format, do not help Cape Breton Gaelic culture and possibly even hurt it. One person expressed the following concern:

I think the stepping song that [Mary Jane Lamond] has done and the things that she did on Ashley's recording go way over that line and become something quite radically different from the tradition that they originated in. I mean, this stepping song thing with all the overdubbing of this sort of whispery stuff and the timing changes and that sort of thing. To me, they have very little connection with Gaelic tradition. And to say that people are learning and coming into Gaelic tradition from hearing that kind of thing, I really doubt very much if they are. Or

if they're coming at anything terribly real in the culture from that sort of pop facsimile of mouth music.

This particular person does not believe that puirt-a-beul will, in fact, draw non-Gaels to the culture but even if they did, my consultant worried that non-Gaels would be uninterested in moving beyond the surface of the culture. In other words, for the very reasons that puirt-a-beul can be made appealing to outsiders -- their ability to be "popified" without causing controversy within the culture -- puirt-a-beul's appeal is problematic. Cape Breton Gaels are understandably proud of their culture. It can be insulting if non-Gaels conclude that puirt-a-beul epitomize the culture.

However, Margo Carruthers, a singer from Halifax who recently released her first Gaelic song recording, defended puirt-a-beul pop:

Modern ears are unaccustomed to the simple beauty of unaccompanied traditional singing; therefore, any business enterprise involved with recording and promoting Gaelic music must address the harsh reality that if Gaelic music is to reach a modern audience, that music must be accessible to modern ears or they won't listen. They won't buy it. They won't learn any Gaelic song. If the business fails to make this music accessible, the business not only fails itself but the culture as well.

Margo believes that songs such as Mary Jane Lamond's "Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean" entice people to buy albums and once they listen to the entire album, they hear a broader, more accurate representation of the culture. Ideally, these audiences learn to appreciate unaccompanied Gaelic song.

But puirt-a-beul are not only used to encourage the average non-Gael to look at Cape Breton Gaelic culture more closely. Cape Breton fiddlers are especially attracted to puirt-a-beul. Frances MacEachen, editor of *Am Bràighe* mused that puirt-a-beul are

kind of a bridge, I guess. Puirt-a-beul can be a bridge to those interested in music to see, you know, to become a more—see that there's a language base to the whole tradition. And I think they're very important like that because, as far as I can see, it was all kind of connected. It was all language, song, story, you know, piping, fiddling.

John Shaw notes that a “characteristic bound to impress the active fieldworker is the degree to which the various components of the culture appear to be interrelated and mutually supporting” (1992/3:38) and argues that the Cape Breton fiddle style is strongly related to puirt-a-beul (1992/3:44-7). Fiddlers, whether from within or without Cape Breton, are therefore drawn deeper into the Cape Breton Gaelic culture by means of Gaelic song and language.

This is the strange contradiction inherent in Cape Breton puirt-a-beul. Over and over again, native or fluent Gaelic speakers expressed ambivalent feelings about puirt-a-beul. One worried that puirt-a-beul's rising popularity will have adverse affects on other aspects of the living Gaelic song repertoire. One worried that puirt-a-beul are not representative of Gaelic culture. A number of Gaelic speakers indicated that while they have no particular problem with puirt-a-beul, they prefer to sing other, more serious and valuable Gaelic songs. Meanwhile, puirt-a-beul have become a regular feature of public performances and commercial recordings. Despite being accorded only minimal cultural value, puirt-a-beul have become increasingly popular. Strangely, the very part of Gaelic song culture that is considered the least valuable *within* Cape Breton Gaelic culture has proven to be the most valuable tool for reaching outside of Gaelic culture to non-Gaels and Gaelic learners. Since puirt-a-beul are not taken seriously within the culture, singers

have the freedom to arrange puirt-a-beul so that they appeal to audiences which may not be familiar with Gaelic song without fear of retaliation by cultural insiders. The lyric simplicity of puirt-a-beul make them valuable pedagogical tools while their musical flair make them useful for programming concert performances and ultimately make them attractive to tourists and other cultural outsiders.

Whether one considers commercial recordings and concert performances of puirt-a-beul as a marketing nightmare or a marketing masterpiece depends on one's perspective. However, puirt-a-beul will no doubt continue to constitute an important part of the musical culture of Gaelic Cape Breton, regardless of one's feelings. And perhaps the contradictory reactions to puirt-a-beul are the most valuable means of promoting the culture since they engage participants in a discussion about the definition and future of Gaelic culture.

6.5 Repertoire and Learning Techniques

It is generally assumed that puirt-a-beul were first brought to Cape Breton from Scotland in the 19th century, when the largest influx of Gaelic-speaking immigrants first arrived. As Catriona Parsons noted, the majority of the puirt-a-beul sung in Cape Breton today are also known in Scotland: "All the puirt-a-beul I know are essentially old-country puirt-a-beul. They're puirt-a-beul I brought with me. I frankly haven't picked up any puirt-a-beul here except one or two ... which I just didn't happen to know in the old country." There are hundreds of puirt-a-beul extant today (cf. Appendix A for a partial

list of titles). And yet my fluent Gaelic speaking consultants were rarely able to list more than two or three puirt-a-beul with which they were familiar (and these were almost invariably “Am Muilean Dubh,” “Calum Crubach,” and “Sud Mar Chaidh an Cal a Dholaidh”). With some additional prodding, my consultants sometimes admitted to recognizing other puirt-a-beul that were either named or sung for them, although they rarely knew the words by heart.

As already noted, Gaelic learners are attracted to puirt-a-beul both for their musical excitement and for their accessible lyrics. They are, however, often unable to access “local” puirt-a-beul since most native Cape Breton Gaelic speakers do not have a varied enough repertoire to share with them. Therefore, many Gaelic learners have turned to Scottish Gaelic song recordings for source material. For example, Margo noted that the dearth of Cape Breton Gaelic resources has led her to use Scottish Gaelic recordings. Her sources for puirt-a-beul “are commercial recordings as well as print sources” (Personal communication, May 12, 1999). This has led to an interesting debate regarding the validity of Scottish puirt-a-beul in the Cape Breton context.

For Beth, there is no problem using Scottish Gaelic recordings when learning puirt-a-beul. Since puirt-a-beul originally came from Scotland, she feels that there is no difference using contemporary Scottish sources when learning new repertoire:

[Puirt-a-beul’s] gotten so sparse with the native speakers and that. And I think that probably the only way to keep the puirt-a-beul really going here is, like I say, what comes out of Scotland because I don't think you're going to find too much of it here.

But others feel that to use Scottish sources is to adopt non-Cape Breton repertoire. They are uncertain that the current Scottish puirt-a-beul repertoire accurately reflects that which was once prevalent in Cape Breton. To these others, the introduction of Scottish puirt-a-beul into the Cape Breton repertoire means an infusion of non-indigenous repertoire. Even though Cape Breton Gaelic song was at one time synonymous with Scottish Gaelic song, it is no longer so. Now Scottish Gaelic songs can be considered foreign to the Cape Breton Gaelic song tradition.

Even so, the influence of Scottish puirt-a-beul has proven strong. In the first place, there are a significant number of Scottish immigrants now living in Cape Breton who have taught puirt-a-beul to Cape Breton singers. For example, Catriona Parsons has taught a number of puirt-a-beul workshops at the Christmas Island Feis and at St. Ann's Gaelic College. Rosemary McCormack has also taught puirt-a-beul at Gaelic song workshops during Togaibh Fonn and has additionally chosen to have puirt-a-beul included on those recordings that her company, B&R Heritage Enterprises, has produced. Gaelic learners then use these recordings as models of Cape Breton Gaelic song in their classes.

Janet Buchanan, in her search for "local" puirt-a-beul, learned the port-a-beul, "Am Pige Ruadh," from Mary Jane Lamond and the recording by The Barra MacNeils. However, Janet may not have known that Lucy MacNeil, the lead singer of The Barra MacNeils, learned "Am Pige Ruadh" from Catriona Parsons rather than from a local singer.

Even widely respected tradition-bearers have become suspect. For example, Joe Neil MacNeil recorded more than one hundred puirt-a-beul for John Shaw and the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project in the late 1970s. However, one consultant warned me that his repertoire might not accurately reflect Cape Breton puirt-a-beul repertoire since Joe Neil was so widely read. This consultant was suggesting that Joe Neil, as a result of his deep love for Gaelic culture, had read as much as possible about anything Gaelic and therefore part of his repertoire might not have come from oral Cape Breton sources, but instead might have been partly a result of written Scottish sources. When I questioned John Shaw about this, he said that he had carefully checked Joe Neil's repertoire and Dr. Shaw feels certain that Joe Neil's repertoire was not influenced by outside sources; he believes that Joe Neil's repertoire was completely Cape Breton in nature (personal communication, July 30, 1999).

For many Cape Breton singers, puirt-a-beul have had to be learned orally since there are so few printed sources, although "oral" often means learning from a recording, whether a field recording or even a commercially produced CD. Frances MacEachen, Gaelic learner and editor of *Am Bràighe*, admits to having learned puirt-a-beul from recordings: "I'm really not as familiar with [puirt-a-beul]. Where I've heard [them] most is just on my recordings of singers, you know, mainly from Scotland and just the new stuff Mary Jane's uncovered from the Shaw collection." It is fascinating that Frances calls Mary Jane's puirt-a-beul "new" even though Mary Jane learned them from recordings of now-deceased tradition-bearers. Mary Jane learned her puirt-a-beul

“orally” from field recordings, which were then arranged and recorded commercially, which in turn re-introduced these songs to the culture. Because the tradition of these particular puirt-a-beul was not continuous, they sound “new” to people young enough not to have heard those songs before the break in continuity.

Sometimes a combination of media is used in order to learn a port-a-beul. Beth explained that, depending on the port-a-beul, she might make repeated recordings of it on a cassette tape so that she can listen to it constantly in order to facilitate learning the tune and to practise the lyrics. To learn the lyrics, she writes them out repeatedly until she memorizes them (cf. Chapter 5.2). Either way, Beth describes learning the tune and words orally, but she either commits them to memory through oral repetition or she commits them to memory through the process of transcribing the lyrics into print.

Some singers have chosen to piece their puirt-a-beul repertoire together from disparate sources. Janet learned the tune for “B’fhearr mar a bha mi” from a recording, but learned the words from a transcription provided by Catriona Parsons. Mary Jane Lamond uses the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project to determine which puirt-a-beul she wishes to learn. She then approaches fiddlers to confirm the port-a-beul tune. Stephanie Conn has used books, recordings, and fiddle tunes to determine the puirt-a-beul she has desired to learn. She often learns the tune from print, checks the lyrics and/or tunes with a Gaelic singer and friend, and works out the final form in consultation with fiddler and colleague, David Greenberg.

This multi-sourced transmission process exposes an interesting aspect of the revival of song. Singers such as Mary Jane Lamond have performed a port-a-beul construction made of multiple sources in order to reconstruct her concept of historical puirt-a-beul performance. Gaelic learners may then turn to Mary Jane Lamond's recordings of puirt-a-beul in order to access a part of the song culture. However, while they believe that they are accessing an "authentic" aspect of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, they are, in fact, using a consciously (re)constructed song form.

This multi-sourced transmission process is also important with reference to the belief that, for many Gaelic singers, lyrics and music could not be separated. Emmerson, quoting Bruno Nettl's *Music in Primitive Culture*, and discussing Margaret Fay Shaw's observations of Gaelic song in Scotland, writes:

Ethno-musicologists [sic] tell us that most primitive peoples seem to conceive of the words and melody of a song as an indivisible unit, are rarely able to differentiate between them and cannot ordinarily give either text or music alone without difficulty. It is illuminating in this connection to note Margaret Fay Shaw's experience in South Uist in the nineteen-forties. "I never heard my friends in Glendale hum or sing an old tune without words. To them the words and the air were inseparable" (1971:5).

One might assume that this was also the case in Cape Breton at one time although such a situation has not been documented. However, it is clear that the separation of tune and lyrics is not only possible but virtually necessary for singers first learning a new port-a-beul. This is especially the case for Gaelic learners, who frequently do not understand the lyrics without their translation:

Usually I kind of get the gist [of the lyrics] and if I don't, well then I can always go to the dictionary and start looking it up to translate it for myself. But I don't

usually try to translate something word for word. I find that's just an awful effort. So if I can get the sense of what's going on or have someone else tell me what it is—Like if I'm here at the Highland Village, I have access to Seumas [Jim Watson]. I just have to say, "What's this about?" Or "Help me here, I'm stuck on these couple of words" (Beth MacNeil).

While this section only makes a cursory examination of the repertoire and learning techniques of Gaelic singers in Cape Breton, the differences help to highlight how puirt-a-beul have changed over time. At one time, they may have been passed orally from one singer to another or from one fiddler to another, but today, they are passed through a variety of means, depending on the sources to which a singer has access and according to the singer's language competency. A fluent Gaelic singer could theoretically still learn a puirt-a-beul orally from another living singer. However, with the devaluation of puirt-a-beul and with the gradual loss of native Gaelic speakers, even fluent speakers, such as Mary Jane Lamond, have had to use multiple sources. Gaelic learners are even more restricted by language barriers and generally depend on teachers, print sources, and recordings in order to establish their own puirt-a-beul repertoires.

6.6 Attitudes

One of the most intriguing aspects of puirt-a-beul is the responses and reactions they generate. Differences of opinion were apparent from my earliest interviews. FW argued that

A lot of people know [puirt-a-beul]. They think of them as rhymes, they think of them as funny. They'll talk about them, they'll laugh about them, but if you're at a house party, you won't have someone sing that when it comes around to their turn just because in terms of the stepping order of songs, they just don't rank for a

native speaker. Maybe they know a whole bunch of them. It's just not regarded as high on the list. ... As they say, "it's just a tune, it's not a song." There's a real distinction between a tune and a song. The Gaelic is not as interesting. It's just a tune. That's the way they'd describe it: "it's just a tune. Why would you sing a tune when you don't have to sing tunes?"

Meanwhile, Rhoda, my next consultant, disagreed, stating that in Scotland, "everyone loves puirt-a-beul."

Early in my research, there already seemed to be differences between attitudes held by Cape Bretoners and those held by Scots. The notion that Scots have no problem with puirt-a-beul was supported by the many Scottish Gaelic song recordings that include puirt-a-beul, as well as Rhoda's approval of the genre. Meanwhile, Cape Bretoners seemed to reject puirt-a-beul, even Mary Jane Lamond who has recorded and released them commercially. To make matters more confusing, I had read that Joe Neil MacNeil had recorded more than one hundred puirt-a-beul for the St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project (Shaw 1987:xiii, n2).

Given that Joe Neil had recorded so many, I was convinced that puirt-a-beul had a more important place in Cape Breton Gaelic culture than early consultants had suggested. It seemed increasingly likely that the strongly articulated negative attitudes were the key to understanding the importance of puirt-a-beul for particular people. Beverley Diamond writes that the expression of (musical) desire is as important as experience when one's construction of identity is involved:

oral narratives must be heard/read not so much in terms of what a person has accomplished but in terms of what they have desired, not just in terms of what they did but in terms of who they sought to relate to by doing it, in terms both of what they actualized about themselves but also in terms of what they excluded

about themselves. In these terms, the role that music plays is often a major one. Musical preferences or associations, the community of friends with whom one seeks to relate not only when joining a performing group but also when idolizing one star or another, vigorously *disliking* one style or another, or even by passively permitting a certain kind of sound to cohabit one's space, these are potent modes of expressing desire, of establishing relationship, and of actualizing self (in press: 2000; emphasis mine).

I wondered if FW, who is an advanced Gaelic learner from Ontario, seeks to relate to native Cape Breton Gaelic speaker by echoing what she believes are their sentiments. Her vigorous dislike for puirt-a-beul may be one way in which she establishes connections to her native Gaelic-speaking friends in Cape Breton. The attitudes expressed by the people I interviewed varied. But whether they were vehemently opposed to puirt-a-beul, indifferent to them, or passionately obsessed with them, their attitudes indicate their relationship to Cape Breton Gaelic culture, their idealizations of it, and their position within it. Cape Bretoners' attitudes, in turn, affect the shape and direction of the culture.

When I first arrived in Cape Breton, I spoke with a Gaelic instructor at UCCB and the Gaelic College in St. Ann's. He suggested that I would struggle to find native Gaelic speakers who have substantial puirt-a-beul repertoires. He argued that because of the strong fiddle culture in Inverness County, there is no current need for puirt-a-beul. On the other hand, in Victoria County, where there are fewer fiddlers but a higher concentration of Gaelic singers, no one likes puirt-a-beul. He told me that he had heard one man say, "the worst thing that ever happened was when words were added to them

fiddle tunes” (fieldnotes June 8, 1998). But he also admitted that it can be just as valuable to explore that which is devalued in a culture, as well as what is valued.

The question for me then became: who dislikes puirt-a-beul and for what reasons? As I sifted through the interviews I conducted, I found that, in general, native Gaelic speakers tended to devalue puirt-a-beul whereas Gaelic learners tended to embrace them. It became clear that attitudes tend to be drawn along language lines. Fluent Gaelic speakers tend to feel ambivalent about puirt-a-beul, generally denigrating them for their unsophisticated lyrics. On the other hand, Gaelic learners, who often do not understand enough Gaelic to be concerned with lyrics, tend to be attracted to puirt-a-beul’s musical elements, such as the tune, tempo, and rhythm. Learners are frequently exposed to puirt-a-beul through their use in the language classroom since their repetitive, silly lyrics are easy and amusing to learn. As the number of native Gaelic speakers has dwindled to fewer than one thousand in Cape Breton, the number of Gaelic learners has risen, and this demographic shift has brought about a corresponding shift in how puirt-a-beul is valued and used within Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

Recall Maxie MacNeil’s story of the Gaelic song competition:

[The judge] came to me afterwards and she said, “Well, you’d have no problem winning this only that’s a port-a-beul.” I said, “That’s not a port-a-beul! That’s a song! I know the people who composed it and it’s got words. The only thing is that it’s been beefed up and if you want to dance with it,” I says, “go ahead and dance! But it’s not puirt-a-beul. It’s a song!”

Maxie had already stated that he does not think much of puirt-a-beul. He differentiates between puirt-a-beul and “songs” based on lyrics, echoing FW’s claims that there is a

difference between a tune and a song. Maxie does not categorize puirt-a-beul as a song genre and neither, apparently, did the judge. Although the judge based her decision on musical cues, determining that Maxie's choice of repertoire was inappropriate for such a context, Maxie argued that his song choice was appropriate based on the lyrics, rather than the music. For Maxie, the lyrics proved that his song choice could not be a port-a-beul. Regardless of the musical indicators, because his song has "real" words, Maxie refuses to categorize his song as a puirt-a-beul.

Another consultant, Duncan MacLellan, also differentiated between puirt-a-beul and "songs," stating, "I don't really care much for [puirt-a-beul] myself I prefer the Gaelic songs." It is perhaps also significant that Duncan's father was a bard. Duncan made it clear that he never learned any puirt-a-beul from his father and I assume that his father never composed a port-a-beul. Had his father known puirt-a-beul and simply not felt it worthwhile to pass on to his son? Or had he never been exposed to them either?

Jamie MacNeil, the consultant who told me to get some "real songs," was explicitly concerned with language issues when he told me that "the language ... is certainly the warp and woof of any culture, as far as I'm concerned. It's the backbone of it. The other things derive from that." None of the scholars I read and none of my consultants suggested that puirt-a-beul should be valued for their lyrics, simple and even nonsensical as they are. Their value is derived from musical aspects, such as their rhythm, alliteration and melody. But because Jamie places so much emphasis on the Gaelic language, he is concerned about their current place within Cape Breton Gaelic

culture: “I don’t hate puirt-a-beul by any means, by any means whatsoever! What I say about puirt-a-beul is that it’s taking the place in singing nowadays that it didn’t used to have.”

There have been recent efforts to revive the Gaelic language in Cape Breton. Gaelic has been reintroduced to the curriculum of some schools and various communities have started *fèisean*, which frequently include Gaelic language lessons or workshops (cf. Chapter 3.3). But it is difficult to reestablish the language in an English-dominated culture. Gaelic is not an “official” Canadian language and so it is not supported and protected in the same way that French is. There are no television programs in Gaelic and only a very few radio programs and magazines/newspapers which incorporate the Gaelic language. One native Gaelic-speaking singer felt that the efforts to revitalize the language were pointless since Gaelic fluency cannot help one to get a job or even to travel. He pointed out that even if young people were to learn the language at school, most Cape Bretoners must move out of the area in order to find employment and therefore those people would not have the opportunity to continue speaking Gaelic and would lose it anyway (fieldnotes, July 27, 1998).

Attitudes towards puirt-a-beul are likely directly related to the status of the Gaelic language. Puirt-a-beul lyrics would never be considered great poetry by either Gaels or English speakers. But since Gaels are attempting to prove their culture’s value to an English-dominated culture and society—necessary since the English culture controls the finances required for the maintenance of Gaelic culture—they need to prove the value of

their culture within English culture's parameters. Puirt-a-beul's lyrics, silly as they are, are not representative of the sophisticated poetry apparent in other Gaelic song types. It is not surprising, then, that native speakers should devalue puirt-a-beul, and instead highlight other Gaelic song types. Moreover, if Gaels are concerned with the loss of their language and culture, they may have to select cultural elements they want to preserve. Again, if language maintenance is a key concern, then puirt-a-beul are probably not going to be given priority in terms of cultural preservation.

Neil John Gillis, a native Cape Breton Gaelic speaker, said that he had no interest in puirt-a-beul because he associates them with bawdy songs: "you couldn't use [puirt-a-beul], you couldn't use those things in public or any place. It's only what you pick up outside somewheres from a bunch of fellows maybe having a couple of drinks." The "indecent" lyrics prevented Neil John from sharing any bawdy puirt-a-beul with me. In this case, the language of puirt-a-beul barred my access to them. The language creates a stigma, prohibiting Neil John from singing them for risk of being labelled as something other than a gentleman. Jim Watson and Jeff MacDonald explained that because I am a cultural outsider and not a fluent Gaelic speaker, I would not understand the point of bawdy puirt-a-beul. To me, as a member of English-Canadian culture, bawdy puirt-a-beul might sound vulgar. To a native Gael, they would be funny (cf. Chapter 6.4.b).

Who does like puirt-a-beul? I have found that Gaelic language learners tend to be attracted to puirt-a-beul. Learners are often exposed to them in their earliest language classes. One of my own first Gaelic songs was a port-a-beul, learned in my first year of

language lessons. Other Gaelic teachers, including Catriona Parsons, David Livingston-Lowe, and Margo Carruthers, also include puirt-a-beul as part of their language curriculum. Puirt-a-beul make good pedagogical exercises because they have simple vocabulary, repetitive lyrics, and their speed and alliteration force students to grapple with Gaelic pronunciation. Although Margo will not teach songs at the expense of language instruction, singing constitutes a substantial part of her lessons. Margo believes that singing offers a means for students to practice pronunciation in a non-stressful, entertaining manner. She teaches puirt-a-beul because she believes that everyone will enjoy them. Recall her comment that the amusing qualities of puirt-a-beul make them ideal for the classroom. Because puirt-a-beul are not considered a serious song type, learners' mistakes are treated light-heartedly and add to the hilarity of the lyrics whereas mistakes in a more serious song would not be funny.

Without language fluency, it seems that Gaelic learners have the freedom to enjoy puirt-a-beul for musical reasons. As Janet Buchanan explained that she enjoys the challenge of singing puirt-a-beul well. She has "fun with them" and despite never being certain if she is singing them correctly, her audiences enjoy them anyway. Stephanie Conn of Puirt-a-Baroque also enjoys performing puirt-a-beul because she concentrates on their musical aspects instead of worrying about the lyrics and their pronunciation.

It is natural that learners gravitate towards the most accessible elements of the culture (cf. Chapter 6.4.h). Students frequently wish to experiment with their growing language skills beyond textbook exercises. Puirt-a-beul are not only accessible

linguistically, but also in more general terms. It is easy to find recordings of puirt-a-beul. They are quick and easy to teach in class. Since they are clearly a popular part of Gaelic language curriculum and since they are relatively easy to learn, they are quite familiar to learners.

Beth MacNeil, another Gaelic learner, also enjoys puirt-a-beul although she is quite aware of the negative attitudes towards puirt-a-beul held by many native speakers. She believes that Cape Breton puirt-a-beul are unpopular because they are associated with childhood songs and are therefore not appropriate for adult singers to perform in public. And yet, Beth, who is middle-aged, chooses to do exactly that. She explained that she sings them because her audience appreciates them, suggesting that the majority of her audiences are non-Gaelic speakers. Puirt-a-beul are appropriate for them because they are short and musically appealing. A lack of Gaelic fluency is not a particular problem when listening to puirt-a-beul.

However, Beth said that she would never sing puirt-a-beul at a milling frolic, where the participants all appreciate the intricacies of Gaelic culture, even if they are not all fluent speakers. Because opportunities to share so-called “serious” Gaelic songs with people who have familiarity with the language are few, puirt-a-beul’s simple lyrics have no place in the milling frolic. Puirt-a-beul are left for those who cannot grasp the sophistication of Gaelic poetry, such as Gaelic beginners and tourists or other cultural outsiders.

Not surprisingly, there are some exceptions to my argument that Gaelic learners are drawn to puirt-a-beul while fluent speakers feel more ambivalently about them. Helen MacNeil, a Gaelic learner, professed to dislike puirt-a-beul. She told me that she does not like puirt-a-beul, jigs or reels since she does not consider them real music. She feels that the notes go by too quickly to enjoy. Both the quick tempo of dance music and the tendency of puirt-a-beul lyrics to be repetitive make her think of rock and roll, which she also dislikes (fieldnotes June 17, 1998). Helen's dislike of puirt-a-beul, however, is not drawn along language lines in this instance; instead, her dislike is based upon musical considerations. Fluent Cape Breton Gaelic speakers who dislike puirt-a-beul quite consistently cited language reasons for their dislike.

Catriona Parsons, a fluent Gaelic speaking immigrant from Scotland, enjoys puirt-a-beul precisely for their use of the language; for example, she loves the use of assonance and internal rhyme. Although Catriona is not a language learner, it is significant that she is from Scotland. In general, Scottish Gaelic speakers appreciated puirt-a-beul more than Cape Bretoners. This is likely because, as several consultants pointed out, puirt-a-beul have a more legitimate place in Scottish Gaelic culture due to the puirt-a-beul categories at the National Mòd.

Despite the negative attitudes of some people, particularly fluent or native Gaelic speakers, puirt-a-beul appear to be growing in popularity. Catriona noted that there seems to be a greater interest in her puirt-a-beul workshops each year. It seems inevitable that, if puirt-a-beul continue to be used in the classroom setting, on recordings, and in

concert programs, learners will continue to be exposed to puirt-a-beul. They naturally turn towards puirt-a-beul as the form of Gaelic song with which they are most familiar, perpetuating the puirt-a-beul tradition by in turn singing them in cèilidh situations, or even as teachers (as in my own situation) or as recording artists (as with Margo Carruthers and Mary Jane Lamond). With the steady decrease of native Gaelic speakers, the future of Cape Breton Gaelic culture is more and more in the hands of the learners. If they continue to maintain an interest in and use puirt-a-beul, they are likely to continue to increase in popularity.

6.7 Waning and Waxing of Puirt-a-Beul

Based on the interviews conducted, it seems clear that puirt-a-beul were once a fundamental part of Cape Breton Gaelic culture and they appear to be enjoying a renewed popularity. However, a number of my older, native Gaelic-speaking consultants did not remember hearing puirt-a-beul in their youths. What happened between the time that puirt-a-beul were first introduced to Cape Breton and their current revitalization? Most of my consultants were asked for an explanation of puirt-a-beul's temporary disappearance.

Some consultants felt that there was a general shift in Gaelic social conditions which, at one time, provided a place for puirt-a-beul but which no longer do. Christine Primrose, a professional Gaelic singer, explained the changes she has observed in Scotland:

See, in our time, there'd be no television. Society was so different. Nowadays, our society, and in the last 20, 30 years, society's completely changed into this *new* culture that we have. This consumer culture, you know. And it's a very attractive one. And that's why it's so dangerous. Because it's so accessible. You know, there's the television: "Sit there and watch that while I make your tea." Women are out working. There're child-minders, you know, there's the whole structure. There's lots of activities that are available to children: after-school activities. So the whole structure has shifted and changed The people don't sing as much anymore in an environment that I was [just] talking about. Because our lives are different now.

When Christine was young, she was often asked to sing not only for her own family, but for her neighbours as well. She was expected to compete in the Mòd and learned songs specifically for that purpose. Ceilidhs, which often included a great deal of singing, were once the main means of entertainment. Now, there is television, radio, and musical recordings, which do not require the effort of going to someone else's home and/or learning a new song or story. The ceilidh is no longer the only means of entertainment.

Frances MacEachen, Gaelic learner and editor of *Am Bràighe*, describes a similar change in Cape Breton. At one time, people sang regularly and informally whereas now it is rare to hear someone singing outside a performance context:

It may be a cultural thing that just sort of—People don't sing as much as they used to. People don't sing as much so they're not going to sing the tunes. Or, you know, maybe there's self-consciousness about it whereas years ago, there wasn't that kind of self-consciousness because people sang a lot.

According to Frances, people were more likely to sing to themselves, in the past, perhaps as they were walking into town or as they were working about the house. Puir-a-beul and other song types would be sung at these times. Without spontaneous singing, the opportunities to learn and practice puir-a-beul diminished.

In addition, since puirt-a-beul were used to accompany dance in the absence of instruments, and since there is no shortage of fiddlers in Cape Breton today, some consultants argued that there is no more need for puirt-a-beul. As Maxie MacNeil put it when I asked why puirt-a-beul disappeared, “Well, I’d say myself it’s because there’s so many damn violin players!” Stephanie Conn agrees:

they didn’t always have fiddles [in the past] and if they didn’t, then the singer could be the fiddle. From a practical point of view, it works fine. It’s just that now, we always have the choice. I don’t know why you would choose it [today] except to be different. I can imagine the dancers getting all distracted by listening to the—because a voice is so much more personal than a fiddle and a piano.

Not only does Stephanie note that there is no longer any practical need to accompany dancing with puirt-a-beul, but she also believes that puirt-a-beul make a poor substitute for instrumental dance accompaniment since the singing would prove distracting to the dancers.

Often cited as a reason for puirt-a-beul’s disappearance is the gradual loss of Gaelic as a living language. Mary Jane Lamond explained:

Gaelic wasn’t being spoken at home and puirt-a-beul and spinning songs and lullabies, those are domestic kinds of things. Like puirt-a-beul wasn’t something that was performed. It wasn’t part of a big social thing like milling songs were. Or like bigger poetry which might’ve been performed in concert or just in the home. ... It wasn’t something people heard over and over again. And once people stopped speaking Gaelic to children, why would they sing them Gaelic songs?

Mary Jane identifies two major problems. First, the loss of the language meant that people stopped singing Gaelic songs. Native Gaelic speakers stopped singing songs because they stopped having contexts in which it would be appropriate to sing them. Many native Gaelic speakers refused to speak Gaelic to their children, believing that

English was a more useful language. Gaelic songs therefore fell by the wayside. Second, Mary Jane identifies puirt-a-beul as a solo song genre used in a very particular context. They were not social songs in the same way that milling songs are. Milling songs remain popular in Cape Breton partly because they bring Gaelic speakers together, providing an opportunity to share their culture and language. Also, since puirt-a-beul were dance songs, they were sung in the dance hall rather than at ceilidhs where people sang songs for each other followed by a discussion of their history and interpretation. Gaels learned new repertoire at ceilidhs. If puirt-a-beul stopped being sung in dance halls and were never sung at ceilidhs, Gaels had few opportunities to learn them.

Catriona Parsons, who teaches puirt-a-beul workshops, identified similar reasons for the loss of interest in puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton:

As far as the milling songs are concerned too, only a very few know all the verses, or a great many of the verses, of certain songs. [Also,] there's been a kind of losing of precise clarity in meaning sometimes and it's because of the transmission of it, I think:: the next person down the line, his Gaelic wasn't perhaps *quite* as good as his grandfather's or his great-grandfather's and he has a sense of what it might have sounded like and what it was, do you see, but didn't really know what the word was. So you have that kind of thing. And yet you can still sing the milling song, do you see? True, with puirt-a-beul, you have lots and lots of vocables and you can change them around and it doesn't matter if it's not a real word. But on the other hand, there are some that can't be made different or it's nonsense. ... Also, puirt-a-beul tends to be sung as a solo. ... It doesn't tend to be done as a group thing. It can be, but it doesn't tend to be. Milling, you can fade into the group.

The gradual loss of Gaelic has meant that some vocabulary and phrases have become obscure and therefore get lost or altered during the transmission process. Catriona argues that, while this may be acceptable in a milling song, the compact nature of puirt-a-beul

lyrics often makes it necessary that all the words are maintained as originally composed. Otherwise, the lyrics become nonsensical. In fact, this alteration through transmission may be the reason that some puirt-a-beul are “nonsensical” today.

As with Mary Jane Lamond, Catriona suggests that the social aspect of milling songs has become an important aspect of their maintenance. Because puirt-a-beul are a solo song genre and, according to Catriona, they are difficult to sing, many Cape Bretoners avoid performing them. Catriona argues that Cape Bretoners prefer to sing milling songs because they are easier to learn and perform and because mistakes are easily covered by the other singers. The solo performance of puirt-a-beul, on the other hand, means that any mistakes are obvious to the listeners.

Margo Carruthers also considers how the social nature of milling songs have meant that they have been better preserved not only in the living oral culture, but also in print collections:

If you talk to the people here who sing the milling songs, they’ll tell you stories of how, when the collectors came to collect the milling songs or collect songs in general, it was usually in a social setting where there would be a table set up and they’d sing a milling song. And then a collector might say, “Well, do you have any more songs?” Well, they’d assume he meant more milling songs so they’d sing some more milling songs. So there seems to be a great amount of milling songs collected and very few other songs.

Milling frolics, as social events, are a visible part of the culture and, not surprisingly, collectors have been attracted to them. Margo believes that Gaelic speakers would never think to offer puirt-a-beul to collectors and, in turn, the collectors (who were often cultural outsiders) did not know to ask for them, unaware of their existence. As a result,

printed collections of Gaelic songs have rarely included puirt-a-beul until recently. The ability of print to canonize and legitimize culture has not been extended to puirt-a-beul. Furthermore, any efforts to revive old Gaelic songs means that puirt-a-beul will again be ignored since the repertoire is simply not readily available to cultural revivalists.

Jim Watson, Gaelic scholar and resident of Cape Breton, feels that many reasons combined to result in the devaluation of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton Gaelic culture:

[the disappearance] definitely has something to do with the disappearance of Gaelic, first of all. I think that's the primary reason. There's only a handful of Gaelic speakers left in Cape Breton I think also, we would have to assume, or we have to speculate that with the wide-spread accessibility of musical instruments, dependency on puirt lessened. As people began to be able to read music from the collections, dependency on puirt lessened. And I would have to speculate that these things may have all combined to weaken the general use of that particular song to convey music.

Again, the loss of the language and the increasing number of instrumentalists have meant that puirt-a-beul are no longer necessary. But Jim went on to add that the shift from Gaelic to English usage as the dominant language within Cape Breton resulted in a corresponding shift in cultural values. With the shift from Gaelic to English values, there was no longer a place for puirt-a-beul, particularly bawdy puirt-a-beul (cf. Chapter 6.4.b).

However, pointing out that there are many puirt-a-beul which are not bawdy, I asked Jim why the non-bawdy puirt-a-beul are also no longer popular. Jim replied:

Well, people do consider them as being trite. They are something like nursery rhymes. I think that when people got together let's say in the rear of Christmas Island, they would often—people by and large couldn't read and write Gaelic—but somebody might have been able to read Gaelic so one thing that was a favourite ... in the wintertime, people would get together over there in different houses in order to learn to sing songs or to sing songs. And they'd often take them out of *An t-Oranaiche*. And I think in the run of an evening like that, for

example, people were also interested in the songs of some of these heavier bards, and they'd be studying words, discussing them and all that sort of thing.

Because ceilidhs frequently involve a discussion about a song—the composer, the meaning of the lyrics, its history, etc.—complex songs of great poetic merit tend to be discussed more than puirt-a-beul. Puirt-a-beul are frequently anonymous tunes of unknown origins. The lyrics are generally simple. Because of their silly subject matter, they tend to be viewed as trite. Cèilidh participants presumably have better or more important songs to analyze. Similarly, Beth MacNeil suggested that puirt-a-beul are children's songs, again preventing them from being taken seriously by native or fluent Gaelic speakers.

Yet, although puirt-a-beul seemed to fade from Cape Breton Gaelic culture for a time, they are enjoying a newfound popularity. While the reasons for their original diminished popularity continue to exist (loss of the language, large number of fiddle players), there are different reasons for their growing acceptance (cf. Chapter 6.4). Christine Primrose suggested that the very fact that puirt-a-beul are not accorded much value within the culture may have helped puirt-a-beul to become popular since their informality makes them accessible: “[puirt-a-beul] comes across as this throwaway type song. So people don't feel so self-conscious when they're singing it.”

Nonetheless, by way of conclusion, one can note Margo's summary observation:

I witness that puirt-a-beul have become almost invisible in the Cape Breton Gaelic culture due to the proliferation and popular appeal of events featuring the singing of milling songs. For example, one of my former students with strong Gaelic roots in the Iona area and without a doubt the most vocal demander for milling songs in the classroom setting had talked for years of establishing a

milling group in Halifax. She has recently done just that and with great success! There has never been talk of establishing a group of puirt-a-beul singers! (Personal communication, May 12, 1999).

6.8 Conclusion

It is clear that one cannot state what puirt-a-beul are without locating a given definition in time and without considering for whom the definition has meaning. It is easy to state that puirt-a-beul are dance music sung in the absence of instruments. However, puirt-a-beul are not so easily characterized. As with all aspects of cultures, puirt-a-beul are amorphous, shifting to serve the needs of different people at different times.

It is easiest to essentialize puirt-a-beul and Gaelic culture in general. Humanity seems to have an innate desire to pin things down and to fix their meaning. This desire has resulted in classification systems such as James Ross's and Francis Collinson's. It has also resulted in the one definition of puirt-a-beul that is so consistently cited by consultants. However, each section in this chapter has revealed that plurality and multiplicity are the keywords for understanding puirt-a-beul. It is impossible to assign a single meaning to them.

The fluid character of puirt-a-beul reflects the larger Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Cape Breton Gaels are constantly placing their culture in Maritime Canada. As they attempt to differentiate themselves from Scottish Gaelic culture, they are considering how their language, politics, music, and song are dissimilar from the latter. They need to

explain why they are worth the government funding they seek for cultural renewal and revival. They are searching for a clear expression of the differences between Cape Breton fiddle music and other types of fiddling, such as old-time, Irish, and Scottish. The attitudes toward puirt-a-beul, their function, and their origin theories all contribute to the complex efforts of Cape Breton Gaels to position themselves in relation to each other and to those outside of their community.

The manner in which each consultant defines puirt-a-beul is informed by his or her attitudes regarding the Gaelic language, degree of fluency, position within the culture, relationships to other Gaels, age, gender, and so on. Puirt-a-beul are far from simple and negligible. In fact, they are important for the light they shed on the efforts of Cape Breton Gaels to define themselves within the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Puirt-a-beul are widely recognized as dance music in the absence of instruments. However, my research has revealed that this simple surface hides a complex web of definitions, attitudes, uses, and issues. What, for me, began as an interest in dance music, resulted in the revelation not only of puirt-a-beul's multiple facets, but some of Cape Breton Gaelic culture's as well.

The value of this research derives from the fact that puirt-a-beul have only been cursorily examined in the past, and those scholars who have chosen to address puirt-a-beul have addressed them in Scotland rather than Cape Breton. There is a general assumption that since Cape Breton Gaelic culture is related to Scottish Gaelic culture, that they are the same. Any differences are attributed to the fact that Cape Breton has preserved 19th century Scottish culture while Scotland has moved on. In fact, Cape Breton has also evolved in its own direction, as Elizabeth Doherty noted in her dissertation on Cape Breton fiddlers. The very different attitudes of Scots and Cape Bretoners regarding puirt-a-beul are a case in point.

Cape Breton Gaelic culture is especially interesting to study at present because there is an attempt to revive the language, music and culture in progress. Scholars of Cape Breton Gaelic culture are rewarded by the opportunity to observe revivalism in action, rather than with hindsight. Frequently, revivals are only assessed after the fact (cf. Rosenberg 1993). In this case, an understanding of puirt-a-beul is deepened by the fact that their use and value are in the midst of change.

In order to understand all facets of puirt-a-beul, I have attempted to provide space for a pluralistic analysis. I interviewed as many people as I could, each offering a unique perspective. Consultants included cultural insiders and outsiders; singers, fiddlers, and dancers; native Gaelic speakers, fluent speakers, and Gaelic learners. Some people were barely familiar with puirt-a-beul whereas others actively seek puirt-a-beul in order to sing and/or teach them. The voices of so many people have resulted in an overview of puirt-a-beul that is not smooth or consistent. There are many unanswered questions and unresolved disagreements. But this is part of what makes puirt-a-beul dynamic and exciting. Ian McKay, introducing his study of Nova Scotia “Folk,” writes, “Piecing together answers, bit by bit, where we can find them, would never give us a conclusive truth. What we can attain is a more respectful and accurate interweaving of our inevitably partial truths” (1994:xvi). Although I sought to explore some dominant themes that were addressed in a majority of interviews, I accepted discrepancies between discussions with different consultants and even apparent conflicts within a single consultant’s interview. Part of my purpose has been to present the raw data to the reader so that s/he may formulate his/her own interpretations and ideas.

In the interest of avoiding chaos, I have had to assume an authoritative position within my research. I chose my consultants, I chose my interview questions, I chose which of my consultants to include and which of their comments to quote. My scholarly fingerprints are on each and every part of this thesis. And yet I have attempted to provide

the reader with some opportunity for checking my assumptions and conclusions by creating consultant portraits and by including substantial direct quotes.

While I take full responsibility for the assumptions and conclusions drawn in this thesis, I aimed to include my consultants' voices as much as possible. Nonetheless, as Clifford, writing of Geertz, reminds us, "Ethnographic data are always constructions of other people's constructions" (1990:68). None of our comments is free from external influences. Every verbal statement is based upon a (re)construction of experiences, thoughts, and feelings. What I have written here is a construction based on my own experiences with the words of my consultants which, in turn, are constructions based on *their* own experiences. Thus, the conclusions drawn are tentative.

Puirt-a-beul's place and meaning within Cape Breton Gaelic culture have not only shifted through time, but also for each member of Gaelic culture. At one time, puirt-a-beul may well have accompanied some type of dancing in the absence of instruments. Then they seem to have become a domestic labour song, sung by women. Now they serve a variety of purposes: they may be used to transmit a fiddle tune "properly," they may demonstrate the breadth of Gaelic culture, they may introduce new Gaelic vocabulary to language learners.

I could be criticized for certain ethnographic gaps. I am well aware that of more than twenty interviews, only two were with fiddlers. Several consultants urged me to spend more time talking to fiddlers and, based on work by Dr. John Shaw and Jackie Dunn, this would likely prove fruitful. Fiddlers could illuminate how puirt-a-beul are

connected to the fiddle tradition (i.e., how they are used to transmit or identify tunes) and indicate the degree of their value within the fiddle community. In addition, Gaelic-speaking fiddlers may be the key to compiling a bawdy puirt-a-beul repertoire. It might also prove useful to interview more dancers. Participants in different types of dance could indicate how puirt-a-beul make good dance accompaniment (or not) and how the steps work with the music. However, I believe that it is still worthwhile examining singers' attitudes towards puirt-a-beul since, after all, puirt-a-beul are songs. They continue to be sung on stages, in the classroom, on recordings, and at festivals.

While my research might be more representative if it included more fiddlers and dancers, their absence from my thesis was due more to ethnographic and personal issues than to any oversight. Because I lived with a Gaelic singer, it is not surprising that the majority of my contacts and experiences involved Gaelic song, rather than dancing and/or fiddling. Additionally, while more than three months in the field felt like a long time to me, it was not long enough to schedule interviews with some people, particularly during the summer months when musicians and dancers are in high demand at teaching institutions and concerts, in both Cape Breton and Scotland. Many potential consultants were also busy with family or they were away on holidays.

In the process of conducting interviews, I learned a great deal about ethnographic issues. In the first place, I found that I prefer interviewing people with whom I have had an opportunity to establish a relationship. Interviews with people I did not know well were difficult because I was unable to accurately assess whether the potential consultant

would be able to provide helpful information and commentary; the informants were less thorough in the information they provided, likely because they were uncertain whether they could trust me; and the informants had a lesser understanding of how their interviews would be used in my research and thesis, leading to difficulties in the later stages of my thesis writing.

I feel that one of the strengths of my thesis is its breadth but that has come at the expense of depth. Multiple interviews with selected consultants may have resulted in a greater understanding of the information provided by those consultants since they would have the opportunity to expand on concepts discussed briefly in earlier interviews; and I would have had the opportunity to review previous interviews and ask questions for additional information or to clarify earlier comments. This thesis could be complemented by research focusing on one to three consultants (perhaps a singer, fiddler, and dancer).

Because I was so determined to minimize my influence on my consultants' comments, I downplayed my knowledge and the direction of my thesis when I interviewed consultants. While I always adhered to ethical guidelines, I would now choose to spend more time discussing the potential role of an interview in my work. I believe that this would actually make consultants more willing to say what they wished since they would not feel uncertain about the eventual use of their words. Ideally, they would take more control of the interview process, censoring the recording as necessary. In addition, I found that many consultants were hesitant to be interviewed because they did not feel that they were authorities on *puirt-a-beul*; if I spent more time discussing my

thesis intentions (i.e., that my goal was to interview as many different people from as many different backgrounds as possible), consultants would have felt more comfortable contributing to my research.

Of course, interviews would be best done in Gaelic; unfortunately, I do not yet have conversational fluency. A lack of Gaelic language skills clearly prevented me from accessing some information, such as bawdy puirt-a-beul. There are undoubtedly other aspects of puirt-a-beul that would become more readily accessible if I were to interview native/fluent Gaelic speakers in Gaelic. My lack of Gaelic quite clearly marked me as a cultural outsider. On the other hand, there is something to be said for the fact that I was a cultural outsider as some of what people said may reflect how Cape Bretoners desire Gaelic culture to be seen. This would certainly help to explain some of the conflicts and controversies surrounding puirt-a-beul.

My thesis would be more thorough if it included portraits of all my consultants. Unfortunately, due to space considerations—and in the interest of keeping my readers' attention—this was not possible. I have attempted to address this problem by including an outline of all the interviews that are not included in the portrait section. I also chose the inclusion of particular portraits based on the information they contain; when a consultant presented me with new information or presented information in a manner that caused my own understanding of puirt-a-beul to change, it was included.

7.1 Directions for Future Research

While I am satisfied with my research and analysis to this point, they are by no means complete. What I have presented is an overview of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton today. Future research could be done on many levels. For example, a history of puirt-a-beul might be undertaken, perhaps using ethnographic interviews, diaries, concert programs, radio programs, recordings, and other source materials to track the existence of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton since it was first sung there. A comparison might be made with puirt-a-beul in Scotland, examining the history of puirt-a-beul in each place, their use in each place, and attitudes towards them. A musical analysis might be undertaken to investigate the connection between Gaelic language and music. Similarly, puirt-a-beul and various types of dance might be analyzed, perhaps revealing which dance form was most likely accompanied by puirt-a-beul. Puirt-a-beul vocables might be compared to those of milling songs and/or canntaireachd in order to determine whether they overlap or not.

My own next step is to look at puirt-a-beul sociolinguistically, since so many consultants highlighted the importance of the Gaelic language. Issues of language seem to affect how people feel about puirt-a-beul as well as how some scholars, such as John Shaw and Jackie Dunn, have described the purpose of puirt-a-beul. I expect that this research will take me back to Cape Breton and over to Scotland, no doubt resulting in many new ethnographic adventures. I am excited at the prospect. Even though one consultant felt that I would never be able to do more than a single paper on the topic of

puirt-a-beul, I have written more than 300 pages on the subject and I am sure that, given the time and resources, I could write many more. Although puirt-a-beul may appear to be a simple and relatively minor song type, they are an integral part of the complexity that is Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

APPENDIX A

PARTIAL LIST OF PUIRT-A-BEUL TITLES AND SOURCES

Although Appendix A contains a considerable number of titles, the list is only partial. The titles come from a variety of materials: musical recordings, archival documents, Gaelic song collections, singers, teachers, and studies, and from workshops. The fact that few of my sources repeat titles from other sources suggests that there are too many for the likelihood or need for any duplication.

Some of the titles listed below may not be considered puirt-a-beul by all Gaelic-speakers. Furthermore, some published examples are not explicitly identified as puirt-a-beul but, based on lyric repetition and overall brevity, I have sometimes jumped to the conclusion that they are puirt-a-beul. These songs are marked with a (?).

Finally, while some puirt-a-beul sources included in this appendix are individuals, this is not to say that they did not learn their puirt-a-beul from some of the same published sources listed below. In a number of instances, individuals (including Catriona Parsons and Rosemary McCormack) taught puirt-a-beul using photocopies of published sources. However, these individuals generally learned puirt-a-beul well before they discovered the published versions and used the latter only as teaching aides.

Some songs may be listed under several different names; puirt-a-beul titles are not formal. Many sources (particularly CDs and *Tocher*) simply titled songs as “puirt-a-beul.” In these cases, they are usually titled according to the first few words of the chorus. Sometimes sources have attributed titles to puirt-a-beul that do not coincide with titles provided in other sources. Where two or more puirt-a-beul with different names are

recognized as the same, they are cross-referenced. However, as this is simply a list of titles and these puirt-a-beul have not been studied in depth, the consistency of cross-referencing cannot be guaranteed. Where the information has been readily available, English tune titles are cross-referenced with the Gaelic puirt-a-beul.

Source Key

<i>Am Bràighe</i>	Cape Breton newspaper
An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music	Sheet music published for the purpose of Royal National Mòd competitions
Beaton Institute	Archive: file number follows
<i>Deoch-Slàinte nan Gillean</i>	Lochlainn, Colm. 1948.
<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>	Comunn Gaidhealch Leodhais. 1982.
<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>	Shaw, Margaret Fay. 1955.
<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i>	Fergusson, Donald A. 1978.
<i>Gaelic Folksongs from South Uist</i>	Shaw, Margaret Fay. 1956.
MacDonald, 1917	MacDonald, Alexander. 1917.
Mackintosh, 1916	Mackintosh, Andrew. 1916.
<i>MacTalla</i>	Advertising insert in <i>Am Bràighe</i>
Museum of Civilization	Music archive: file number follows
Public Archives of Nova Scotia	Music archive: file number follows
<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>	MacDonald, K.N. 1901.
<i>Songs of the Hebrides for Schools</i>	Kennedy-Fraser, M. and Kenneth MacLeod.
St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project	From the archived recordings: consultant's name follows
<i>The Gesto Collection</i>	MacDonald, K.N. 1895.
<i>Tocher</i>	Journal from the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh
<i>Tog Fonn</i>	Mhàrtainn, Cairistiona. 1994.

- Commercially released recording sources are cited with the name of the performing artist followed by the name of the album on which it can be found.
- Individual contributions, provided at workshops, choir rehearsals, and interviews, are cited under individuals' names and are in my private collection.

THC	SOUTH
A'bhanaidh bhan	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A'bhanaidh a Bha'n Tollaraidh	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i>
A'bhean a bh'aig an Fhìdhleir	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A'Bhean a bh'aig an Taillear Chaol	An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music; Tog Fonn; Parsons, Catriona; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A'bhean eudach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A Chaorain, a Chaorain	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
A'Chaora Chrom	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i> ; St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A'chaora ruadh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A'ghunna dubh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A'Mhisg a Chuir an Nollaig Oirnn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A Bhean, a Bheil an Cadal Ort?	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A Bhodaich a Bhodaich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac and Joe Allan MacLean
A chur nan gobhar as a'chreig	Parsons, Catriona
A Cold Wind over Wyvis: see 'S toigh leis an duin' agam	
A Dhomhnaill Bhain an Ith Thu Rud?	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A Dhomhnaill, a Dhomhnaill	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A h-Uile Dad a Ni Mi	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A ho 'S Aighearach an Nochd	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A Man's a Man: see An Gille Dubh	

A Mhartachain o a Gao	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A mhic a'bhodaich a Braigh Mharr aka Cameron Got His Wife Again; Heather Jock	Mackintosh, 1916
A Mhic Iain Ghasda	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A mhic na circe topanaich	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A Mhorag a Bheil Thu Ann	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A Mhorag nighean Dhomhnuill Duinn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A Mhorag, a bheil thu ann?	<i>Puirt-a-Baroque: Return of the Wanderer</i>
A Nighean Bhannach Duilich Dhuit	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
A nighean donn an airidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
A nighean og a'chota dhuibh aka The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling	MacDonald, 1917
A Null thar Monadh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A ri a ro a, cailleach a'bhreabadair	<i>Gaelic Folksongs from South Uist</i>
A Ruairidh a Bheil Thu Tighinn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
A Sheana-bhean Bhoichd	Mary Jane Lamond: <i>Bho Thir nan Craobh</i>
A Toirt nan Gobhar as a Chreag aka An t-Eileadh Beag bu Docha Leam	Margo Carruthers
A-null thar an eileanan	Capercaillie
Ag Iomain nan Gamhann	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Agus O, 'Ille nan Car, Umad Tha Mi Eolach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Aig Ceann an Rathaid Iaruinn	McCormack, Rosemary
Air do shlainte Mhairi 'n Dotair	<i>Tocher</i> . 1971 #1:7
Am Bal a Bh'anns an Oban	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic

	Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Am Bothan a Bh'aig Fionnghuala	Calum Johnston; Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Am bun a'chruidh cha chaidil mi aka A Man's a Man	MacDonald, 1917
Am Bun an Fhraoich Cha Chaidil Mi	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Am Muilean Dubh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; The Mod Collection of Gaelic Part Songs; Museum of Civilization CR-At-64.11; An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music; Mary Jane Lamond: <i>Bho Thir nan Craobh</i> ; Ashley MacIsaac (with Mary Jane Lamond): <i>Hi How Are You Today?</i>
Am Muilean Dubh: see also <i>Nead na Circe Fraoich</i>	
Am Pige Ruadh aka Fear nan Casan Caola; The Rejected Suitor	Mackintosh, 1916; Parsons, Catriona; The Barra MacNeils: <i>Closer to Paradise and Until Now</i>
Amadan gorach saighdeir	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An Coileach a Bh'aig Fionnghall	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
An doctair Leodach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An dubh m'an geal 's an liath m'an buidhe	<i>Tocher</i> . 1983 #38:38
An Fhaighir Muileach	An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music
An Gille Crubach anns a Ghlearnn	<i>The Gesto Collection</i> ; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An gille donn's a' bhanarach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An Gille Dubh aka A Man's a Man	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
An Gille Dubh Gur Fad Amuigh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
An gille dubh mo laochan	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

An gille mor Foghainteach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An leannan a bha agam an uiridh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
An oidhche bha na gobhair againn aka Lady Mary Ramsay	MacDonald, 1917
An Oidhche Bha na Gobhair Againn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
An Ràcan a Bh'Againne	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
An t-Eileadh Beag bu Docha Leam aka A Toirt nan Gobhar as a' Chreag	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
An t-fheileadh aka A Toirt nan Gobhar as a'Chreag	McCormack, Rosemary
An Tailleir 'na Shineadh 'sa Bhathaich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
An tailleir an gille laghach	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
An Te Mhor, Fhada Mhor	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
An Teanga Riabhach	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i>
Anna Bheag Laghach 'na Sineadh 'sa Fhraoch	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Mary Ann MacMillan
Arndamurchan Lads: see Dom dom doichean	
Athole Cummers: see O Nach Deanadh Tu 'n Dannsa Direach	
B'fhearr mar a bha mi'n Uiridh	Kenna and Mary Campbell; Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Bainis Riomhach Mairi an Dotair: a) Tailleir Bharra	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Banais Nighean Mhairi Anna	An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music
Bann de Ribinnean	Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Sólas</i>
Bealach a'Mhorbheinn	MacDonald, 1917
Bean a'Chota Bhain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Bha mi air banais am Bail' Ionar-aora aka The	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic

Campbells are Coming	Folklore Project: Joe Allan MacLean; MacDonald, 1917; Mackintosh, 1916
Bha Tri Chasan Deiridh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Bheir Deoch Bhainne dha'n Fhidhleir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Bheir Dhomh Fhin do Lamh, a Mhorag	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac
Bheirinn siud do Mhairi	Catriona Parsons
Bho'n chuir mo leannan culthaobh rium aka Donside	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; The Gesto Collection
Bidh Mi Falbh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Biodag air Mac Thomais	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Biodag air MacCombaich	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Biodag Dhomhnaill 'ic Alasdair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Biogais Dhubh nan Dusan Toll	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Bithidh Clann bheag a' bhaile muigh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Bithidh Fionnladh aig innearach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Bithidh mis' air uisg' an Ionain duibh aka Jessie Smith	Mackintosh, 1916
Bodach Innse 'Chro	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Bodach na h-adaig bha mis' aige raoir	<i>Tocher</i> . 1983 #38:39
Bodachan a Mhill Anna	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Bodachan a' Mhirein aka High Road to Linton	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie Dan N.

	MacLellan; <i>Oran nan Gaidheal</i> ; Stephanie Conn; The Rankin Family: <i>The Rankin Family</i> ; Margo Carruthers: <i>Tàlant nam Bàrd</i> ; Tog Fonn
Bodachan a' Phinnt leanna	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Bodachan a'gharaidh	<i>Tocher</i> .1976 #1:191
Bodachan ar-i-ar-o	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Bodaich na h-Odh'	Catriona Parsons
Boyne Water: see Carson a bhiodh sin muladach	
Braes of Mar: see Siud Mar Dhannasadh Uisdean Friseal	
Brig o' Perth: see Ruidhleadh Fionnladh	
Brigis fad' air mhaighstir Ord	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Brochan lom	An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music; Parsons, Catriona; <i>Oran nan Gaidheal</i> ; Finlay MacLean: <i>Celtic Mouth Music</i> ; Tog Fonn; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Brogan air Seorsa Duin	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>The Gesto Collection</i> ; The Rankin Family: <i>Fare Thee Well Love</i> ; MacDonald, 1917; Tog Fonn
Ca' the Stirks	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Cabar Feidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cailleach a'Ghobhainn is Cailleach a'Mhuilleir	MacDonald, 1917
Cailleach Chrubach	Primrose, Christine
Cailleach Liath Ratharsaigh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac; <i>The Gesto Collection</i> ; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; Catriona Parsons
Cailleach Liath Ratharsaigh: see also Sabhall beag a'Bhaillidh	
Cairistion' Nighean Eoghainn	<i>Tocher</i> . 1971 #3:86
Cairistiona Chaimbeul aka The Miller of Drone	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Mrs. MacDonald; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; MacDonald, 1917; McCormack,

	Rosemary; Cape Breton Gaelic Choir; Public Archives of Nova Scotia MG1 Vol 2803 #11
Cait' an robh thu'n duigh 's an de aka Highland Laddie	MacDonald, 1917
Calum Crubach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan; Mary Jane Lamond: <i>Bho Thir nan Craobh</i>
Calum Figheadair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Calum luideach air mo chul	<i>Tocher</i> . 1983 #38:39
Cameron's got his wife again	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cameron Got His Wife Again: see A mhic a'bhodaich a Braigh Mharr	
Campbell of Lochnell's reel	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Car agad a ruidhle bhodaich	<i>Tocher</i> . 1972 #7:205
Carrick's Reel: see Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais	
Carson a bhiodh sin muladach aka Boyne Water	Mackintosh, 1916; MacDonald, 1917
Cas a' Mhogain Ilich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: John Shaw
Casan caola, neònach	<i>MacTalla</i> (advertisement) 1998:10; <i>Am Braighe</i> Summer 1993:15
Cas na Caora Hiortaich, Ó	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Cawdor Fair	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cawdor Fair: see Ruidhle Cheat leis a'ghun mhor; Chi mi'm bodach 's a dha chu	
Cawdor Fair: see Ruighleadh Cailleach Eachainn Mhoir	
Cha Bhodach a Gheibh Mairi (?)	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i> (referred to as a "dandling song")
Cha'n fhaigh duine Maigean	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cha'n fhaod Calum carachadh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cha Tig an Latha	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Cha Tig Mor Mo Bhean Dhachaid	McCormack, Rosemary
Cha toir lain Mor a nighean domh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cha toirinn tri sgillinn oirre	<i>Tocher</i> . 1981 #34:260

Chaidh mi sìos, chaidh mi suas aka Pease Strae	MacDonald, 1917
Chaidh mis' dha'n traigh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Chan eil mo leannan ann a'seo	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Chan fhaod Calum carachadh aka The Wind That Shakes the Barley	Mackintosh, 1916
Chi mi 'm bodach 's a dha chu aka Cawdor Fair	MacDonald, 1917
Christmas Carousal: see 'S e mhisg a chuir an Nollaig oirnn	
Chuir mi biodag anns a'bhodach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Chuirinn air a phiob	<i>Ceol na Gaidhlig</i>
Chuirinn mo bhalachan	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i>
Chunna mi 's gum b'fhiosrach mi orra (?)	<i>Tocher</i> . 1992 #44:105
Chunna mi	MacDonald, 1917
Ci an Fhidheall (?)	<i>Tocher</i> . 1985 #39:154
Ciamar a ni mi an dannsa dìreach	Catriona Parsons
Cille Chrìosda	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Clann Bheag a' Bhall' Amuigh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Clunie's Reel: see Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais	
Cnamh Do Chir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Mrs. MacDonald
Co th'ann ach Anna mo nighean	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Cota fad' air Domhnull lom	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Cota Mor Ealasaid	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Puirt-a-Baroque: Return of the Wanderer</i>
Creicidh Mi Mo Sheanmhair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Crodh Laogh nam Bodach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Cruinn, gearr, sgiobalta	<i>Tocher</i> . 1981 #34:218
Cuir 'sa Chiste Mhoir Mi	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

Cuir Dhachaidh an t-Aodach lasaid	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac
Cuirinn air a' Phiob	McCormack, Rosemary
Cul an Tigh-osda aka The Back of the Change-House	MacDonald, 1917
Da thabh air an fharaid	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i>
Dainty Davie	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Dance Jeannie	<i>Tocher</i> . 1978 #8:230
Dance to Your Shadow (from Bando Ribinnean)	<i>Songs of the Hebrides for Schools</i>
Danns' a Bhrigi, Danns' a Bhocai	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Dansa na boineid	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Dansa nan Tunnagan	Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Sólas</i>
Dansaibh i	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Daor-i-itil aor am	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Dar a theid thu thar' a' mhonaidh aka Stumpie, The Highland Wedding	MacDonald, 1917
Delvin-side	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Dh'fhalbhainn sgiobalta	Mary Ann Kennedy
Dhannsamaid le Ailean (?)	<i>Tocher</i> . 1971 #1:6
Dhireadh tu na Firichean	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Dhiult am bodach fodar dhomh	<i>Ceol na Gaidhlig</i> ; McCormack, Rosemary
Dinna think, Bonnie Lass: see Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais	
Dith nam Brog air Donnchadh Dubh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Do Chrochadh a Thoill Thu	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Dom dom doichean aka Ardnamurchan Lads	MacDonald, 1917
Domhnall a'Ruith nan Gobhar	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Domhnall a'Tighinn dha 'm Shireadh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Domhnall a tighinn	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i>

Domhnall beag an t-siucar	<i>Tog Fonn; Catriona Parsons; Eilean Fraoich</i>
Domhnall Dubh	Sileas
Domhnall Gobha 's Boineid Air	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Domhnall mac 'ic Iain aka Nuair dh'Eugas Domhnall Mac Iain	Mary Jane Lamond: <i>Suas e!</i>
Domhnall a'ruith nan gobhar	MacDonald, 1917
Domhnall na Biodaige	MacDonald, 1917
Don-side	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Donside: see Bho 'n Chuir mo Leannan Cul Rium	
E ho rithill aill	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Eoghain 'Us Fear a'Chiubha	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i>
Faca Sibh Oighrig?	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Faca tu Saor	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i>
Far am bi mi fhin	<i>Tog Fonn</i>
Fear a'Choire	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Fear a'Phige	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Fear a dh'Ith na Caolain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Iseabel Fortune
Fear an Duin Mhoir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; Kenna and Mary Campbell; Primrose, Christine
Fear nan Casan Caola	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Fear nan Casan Caola: see also Am Pige Ruadh	
Feile Beag	Museum of Civilization CR-At-64.10
Feumaidh mi mo glhun a dheanamh aka The Braes of Mar	MacDonald, 1917
Fhir a dh'ith am bonnach mor	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Fhuair mi nead a'Ghurra-Gug	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Fidhleir bha'n Cearn na Drochaid aka	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic

Mason's Apron	Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Finlay's	Capercaillie: <i>Hebridean Hale-Bopp</i>
Fiodhull Iain 'ic-ghille-mhaoil	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Fire, Faire an d'Fhuair Sibh Iasg	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Fosgail an Dorus	Capercaillie: <i>Sidewaulk</i> ; McCormack, Rosemary; Mrs. Archie MacDonald
Gabhaidh sinn an Rathad Mor	MacDonald, 1917
Gaol Air a'Ghille Bhuidhe (?)	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i> (referred to as a "dandling song")
Ge b'oil le MacGriogair theid mise 'n Tigh Mhor aka Kenmure is on and Awa	Mackintosh, 1916
Ged a tha do Chasan Caola	Cape Breton Gaelic Choir
Ged bhiodh na laoigh an cois a'chruidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Gheibh sinn ribinnean mora, mora	<i>Tocher</i> . 1986 #40:236
Gheobh Mo Ghaol Brochan Bainne	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ghoid Thu 'n t-Im a Mhairlich Mhoir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Gille Calum	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Gille glas Mhic Eachuinn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Gillean an Droghair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Gillean an Fheilidh aka The Kilted Lads	MacDonald, 1917
Gillean nan Caorach	MacDonald, 1917
Gillean nan Droghair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Glenmore: see Ruidhle Mhor Shrath-Spey	
Grinn Donn Sgiobalta	Primrose, Christine; Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Gu'n d' dhiult am bodach fodar dhomh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Gu cuir nan Gobhar as a'chreig	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

Gun Do Chaill lad na h-Inean	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Gun Leag Iain Ruarachan	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Gur E Mo Ghaol am Fireannach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
H-eadaraibh a h-uinn o	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Hai-o na h-eireagan	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Harbour Grace	Museum of Civilization CR-At-77.4
Haughs of Cromdale	<i>Puirt-a-Baroque: Return of the Wanderer</i>
Haughs of Cromdale: see Siud mar a Chaidh an Cal a Dholaidh	
Headarinn Hochinn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Heather Jock: see A mhic a'bhodaich a Braigh Mharr	
Hey Hoch Johnny Lad: see Ho Ro Mo Nighean Laghach	
Hi ho hiram	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
High Road to Linton: see Bodachan a' Mhirein	
Highland Laddie: see Cait' an robh thu'n duigh 's an de	
Hileag 's huileag is fhuair mi ainem	<i>Tocher</i> . 1990 #42:389
Hilen is hogu	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ho ma thuiteas, he ma thuiteas aka The Bridge of Perth	MacDonald, 1917
Ho Ro 'S Coma Leam Co-Dhiubh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Archie MacKenzie
Ho Ro 'S e 'n Gille Fada	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ho ro an Gille Fodair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Ho ro cha d'Fhuair thu 'n Cadal	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Ho Ro Cha Teid Mi Tuilleadh Ann	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil

Ho Ro Far am Bi am Bal	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ho ro Ghoid Thu Nighean aka Jenny Dang the Weaver	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Ho Ro Gu 'n do dh'Fhalbh an Gobha	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ho Ro Gun Ceannaichinn Cota is Gun	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ho Ro Mo Nighean Laghach aka Hey Hoch Johnny Lad	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Ho ro na Ribeinean	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ho Ro na Riobainean	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Archie MacKenzie
Ho ro nighean dubh, bheag a'chitsinn aka The Braes of Mar	MacDonald, 1917
Ho ro shiubhlainn fada	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Ho tha 'n tombaca daor aka The Lads of Mull	MacDonald, 1917
Ho-an o-an ars' an cu ban	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ho-ro m'ulaidh Thu	<i>Tocher. 1977 #27:161</i>
Hoch hey! Johnny lad	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Hoch hey! Johnny Lad: see Ho ro mo Nighean Laghach	
Hoch Ho Johnny Lad: see Ho ro cha d'Fhuair thu 'n Cadal	
Horo Ghoid Thu Nighean	Mary Jane Lamond: <i>Suas e!</i>
I Bhi a Da	Mouth Music: <i>Mouth Music; Tog Fonn</i>
I went to the shore	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Innsidh Mise, Cuiridh Mi Geall	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Iseabal nic Aoidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Iuraibh o hi iuraibh o hu	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Jenny's bawbee	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Jenny dang the weaver	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

Jenny Dang the Weaver: see 'S coma leam buntata cararch	
Jenny Dang the Weaver: see Ho ro Ghoid Thu Nighean	
Jessie Smith: see Bithidh mis' air uisg' an Ionain duibh	
John MacMillan's fiddle	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
John Roy Stewart	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Kenmure's on and awa'	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Kenmure is On and Awa: see Ge b'oil le Mac Griogair theid mise 'n Tigh Mhor	
Lady Madelina Sinclair	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Lady Mary Ramsay: see An oidhche bha na gobhair againn	
Lan tighe dh'fhidhlearn	MacDonald, 1917
Larach do thacaidean	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Leannanachd air feadh na coilltean	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Leiginn mo bhalachan	MacDonald, 1917
Loisg a'chailleach a casan air eibhleg aka The Hills/Braes of Glenorchy	
Long a'Mharaiche	MacDonald, 1917
Lord MacDonald's Reel: see Maighdeanan a'Choire Dhuibh	
M'Eudail Air Do Shuilean Donna	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i> ; Primrose, Christine
M'Iteagan is M'Eòin s M'Uighean	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Ma Ruidhleas Cailleach Mhic an t-Saoir aka Ruidhleadh C—	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Allan MacLean
Ma Tha Bean a Dhith Oirbh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Archie MacKenzie
Mac-a-Phi	Tog Fonn; Parsons, Catriona
Macpherson's Lament: see Theid sinn	
Maighdeanan a'Choire Dhuibh aka Lord MacDonald's Reel	Mackintosh, 1916
Maighdeannan a'Choire Dhuibh aka The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling	MacDonald, 1917
Mairearad Mhor is Luireach Oirre	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mairi Iain Mhoir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Mairi Nighean Mhor	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan

Mara Bhi an Crodh Cha Ghabhainn Thu	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mason's Apron: see Fidleir bha'n Ceann na Drochaid	
Meal do bhrogan	Mary Ann Kennedy
Meg's marryin, the maiden o the mill	<i>Tocher</i>
Mhaighdeannan a'choire dhuibh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Mhnathan a'Ghlinne Seo	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Mhorag an tu bh'ann	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Mhorag Bheag Nighean Mhurchaidh an t-Saoir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mhorag, An Tu Tu! Mhorag, an Tu Bh'Ann	<i>The Gesto Collection</i>
Mi Fhin 's Tu Fhein a Dhomhnullain (?)	<i>From the Farthest Hebrides</i> (referred to as "dandling song")
Mi Fhin 's Mo Bhean air an Daoraich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Miss Cruickshank	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Mnathan a'Ghlinne Seo	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mo Chas Churbach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mo Chuach Laghach Thu	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mo ghaol air an Fheadhainn Dubh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Mo Ghaol an Gille Beag Ruadh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mo ghun ur sioda	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Mo nigh'n donn nan caorach, o	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Mo nighean chruinn sgiobalta	<i>Tocher</i> . 1971 #4:134-5
Mo Shuil ad' dheidh (?)	The Rankin Family
Mo thasdan boidheach	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Moladh Chabair-Feidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Mony's a gless A've gien tae Katie	<i>Tocher</i> . 1976 #24:330

Mor a'Cheannaich	Mouth Music: <i>Mouth Music</i>
Mor is mairi, Thug lad am Fireach Orra	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mor Nighean a'Ghiobalain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac
Morag bheag	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Morag is Domhnall	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Mu Ghun Tomaidh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Munlochie Bridge: see Siud an Gaol a Ghabh Mi Ort	
Mur a bitheadh Domhnull	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Mur b'e an crodh cha ghabhainn thu aka Neil Gow	Mackintosh, 1916
Mura Bhi 'n Crodh Cha Ghabhainn Thu	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Murchadh Tobha churraig dhuibh	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Na'm biodh tri sgillinn agam	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i> ; McCormack, Rosemary
Na'm bitheadh agam trusdar bodaich	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Na maighdeannan is boidhche cruth aka The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling	MacDonald, 1917
Na maragan aig Ruairidh	An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music
Nach truagh leat mi ma's droch bhean i aka The Highland Wedding	MacDonald, 1917
Nam Amadan	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: John MacKenzie; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; <i>Eilean Fraoich</i> ; Margo Carruthers: <i>Tàlant nam Bàrd</i> ; <i>Tog Fonn</i>
Nam Biodh Tri Sgillin Agam	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nead an Fhithich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil

	MacNeil
Nead na Circe Fraoich see also Am Muilean Dubh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nead na lach' as a luachair	Mary Ann Kennedy
Neil Gow: see Mur b'e an crodh cha ghabhainn thu	
Nighean Bhuidh Ruadh	Capercaillie: <i>Sidewaulk</i>
Nighean Chaluim Mhoir an t-sruth	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Nighean Donn na h-Airigh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nighean Donn nam Miog-Shuil	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nighean na Cailliche crotaiche crubaich	<i>Puirt-a-Beul; Oran nan Gaidheal</i>
Nigheanag a'Chota Bhuidhe	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nigheanagan a'Choire Dhuibh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Nuair a dh'Eugas Domhnall Mac Iain aka Domhnall mac 'ic Iain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil, Iseabel Fortune and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Nuair Bha Mi Aotrom Og	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Dan Rory MacNeil
Nuair bha mi fhein 'nam mhaighdean	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Nuair bha mi na mo mhaighdinn	<i>Eilean Fraoich; Catriona Parsons</i>
Nuair thig mo bhodach-sa dhachaidh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Null thar nan Eileanan	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
O' Chairich E 'na Lub	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
O dinna think, bonnie lassie	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ò Eadar an Dà Chraicinn!	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
O Gu Dearbh Bu Mhath Leam	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil

	MacNeil
O hi o bho, ho ro'n aill leibh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
O Ho na Ribeanan	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist; Tannas</i>
O Ho Phirearaig	<i>Capercaillie: Hebridean Hale-Bopp; Puirt-a-Beul</i>
O Ho Ro Gur h-lomadh h-Am	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
O M'Ulaidh, M'Ulaidh Ort	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
O Nach Deanadh Tu 'n Dannsa Direach aka Athole Cummers	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
O Nach Robh Leannan Againn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
O Nam Bu Leam Thu	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
O Ro 'S E a' Bhainish Robach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
O siuthadaibh bhalachaibh	Catriona Parsons
Och, Och, Mar a Tha Mi	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Off she goes or off she did went, man	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Oran m'n Ghrugaich-Mhara	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Oran na Faoileig	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Oran na Feannaig	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Over the Isles to America	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Pease Strae: see Chaidh mi sios, chaidh mi suas	
Pieigi Dhomhnail 'ic Thearlaich	McCormack, Rosemary
Pog o leannan an fhidhleir	Catriona Parsons
Port Dhomhnaill Mhic Guthagain	<i>The Gesto Collection; Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Port Sugraidh do Mhac Dara Choluim Sheain	<i>Deoch-Slainte nan Gilleann: Òrain à Bharraidh</i>
Puirt Phiobaireachd	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Reel of Tulloch	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Righ nam port	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Riobainean Riomhach	Catriona Parsons

Ruidhle Cailleach Eachainn Mhoir	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ruidhle Cheat leis a'ghun mhor aka Cawdor Fair	MacDonald, 1917
Ruidhle Mhor Shrath-Spe aka Glenmore	MacDonald, 1917
Ruidhle mo nighean dhonn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ruidhle Thulachain	<i>Tog Fonn</i>
Ruidhleadh cailleach, sheatadh cailleach	<i>Tocher</i> . 1981 #34:218
Ruidhleadh Fionniadh aka Brig o' Perth	Mackintosh, 1916
Ruidhleadh Mo Thomagan	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ruidhleadh mo Tommy Young	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ruidhlich na Coilich Dhubha	Parsons, Catriona
Ruidhlidh Cailleach Eachainn Mhoir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Ruidhlidh mo Nighean Donn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Ruidhlidh na Coilich Dhubha	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; An Comunn Gaidhealach: Mod music; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; <i>Oran nan Gaidheal</i>
Ruidhleadh Cailleach Eachainn Mhoir aka Cawdor Fair	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
S ann an chuir am bodach feagal orm aka The Back of the Change-House	MacDonald, 1917
S ann an Ile	<i>Oran nan Gaidheal</i> ; McCormack, Rosemary; Norman Kennedy: <i>Celtic Mouth Music</i> ; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; <i>Tog Fonn</i>
S Ann Tha Mo Dhurachd	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: John Shaw
'S Coma Liom Buntàta Carrach	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
S coma leam buntata carrach aka Jenny Dang the Weaver	MacDonald 1917
S Coma Leis na h-Ighneagan aka Smith of Killiechassie	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N.

	MacLellan
S e Domhnall Mac 'Illeasbuig Dhuibh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
S e mhisg a chuir an Nollaig oirnn aka Christmas Carousal	MacDonald, 1917
S fheudar dhomh fhin	MacDonald, 1917
S hi o ailidh hailidh idil (?)	<i>Tocher</i>
S i Morag a Rinn a'Bhanais	<i>Oran nan Gaidheal</i>
S ioma rud tha dhith orm	<i>Eilean Fraoich; Tog Fonn; Catriona Parsons</i>
S lomadh Im Thug do Mhuime Dhut	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
S lomadh Rud a Chunna Mi	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
S math a dhannsadh	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
S Mise Gheobh Na Brogan	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac
S toigh leis an duin' agam aka A Cold Wind over Wyvis	MacDonald, 1917
S trusaidh mi na coilleagan	Catriona Parsons
Sabhall beag a' Bhailidh -- sung to tune of Cailleach Liath Raarsaidh	MacDonald, 1917
Saoil a Mhor am Pos	Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Saor an t'Sabhaidh	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i> ; Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Spiorad</i>
Seallaibh Curaidh Eoghainn	The Barra MacNeils: <i>The Question</i> ; McCormack, Rosemary; Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Sólas</i> ; Mrs. Archie Arnott; Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside</i>
Sean Truibhas	Tannas
Seann-Triubhas Uilleachain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Seinn O	Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Sólas</i>
Seonaid Nic Gumaraid	McCormack, Rosemary; <i>Ceol na</i>

	<i>Gaidhlig</i>
Sheatadh Cailleach	<i>Tocher</i> : 1977 #27:160; Talitha MacKenzie: <i>Sólas</i>
Shingealaich, Shingealaich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Shiubhlainn shiubhlainn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Si Morag, 'si Morag	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> , Margaret Bennett
Siream Sios, Siream Suas	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; Janet Buchanan
Siud a Rud a Rinn Thu	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Siud Amach an Ludag	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Siud an Gaol a Ghabh Mi Ort aka Munlochie Bridge	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Siud an Rud a Thog am Fonn	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Siud mar a Chaidh an Cal a Dholaidh aka Haughs of Cromdale	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil; <i>Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia</i> ; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; <i>Puirt-a-Baroque: Return of the Wanderer</i>
Siud Mar Dhannsadh Uisdean Friseal aka Braes of Mar	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Siudaibh 'illean, gabhaibh 'm port	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Smith of Killiechassie: see 'S Coma Leis na h-Ighneagan	
Soiridh Leat a Chiallain	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Sproileag	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Stad a Mhairi bhanarach	Parsons, Catriona; Tog Fonn

Stocainnean daoimean	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Stumpie: See Dar a theid thu thar' a' mhonaidh	
Sud an rud a thogadh m' fhoann aka The Lads of Mull	MacDonald, 1917
Suilean Dubha	McCormack, Rosemary
Tearlach Fidhleir	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha an Laogh anns a' Ghambnaidh	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha bairn' a'chruaidh aig Morag bheag	McCormack, Rosemary; <i>Ceol na Gaidhlig</i>
Tha Bal a Nochd aig Criosdan Crotach	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Dougall MacDonald
Tha bean agam	Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Tha biodag aig Mac Thomais	Mairi MacInnes: <i>This Feeling Inside; Puirt-a-Beul; From the Farthest Hebrides</i>
Tha biodag air Mac Alasdair	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Tha boireid bheag bhiorach air Alasdair	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Tha Caileag air an Urlar	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha Deargan air Iain mac Pheadail	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Tha dith nam brog air Donnachan dubh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Tha fear na coie bige, bige	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Tha Fionnladh ag Innearachd	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac; Catherine-Ann MacPhee; McCormack, Rosemary
Tha gaoth mhor air Loch-an-t-Seilich aka The Maid of Islay	MacDonald, 1917
Tha i tarruing anmoch	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Tha m' Inntin Raoir	Christine Primrose
Tha mi air mo chuir's an Talamh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais aka Carrick's Reel; Clunie's Reel; Carrick's Rant; Dinna think, Bonnie Lass; The Smith's a Gallant Fireman	Mackintosh, 1916; <i>Tocher</i> . 1979 #30:374
Tha mi sgith see also Buain na Rainich	Parsons, Catriona; Capercaillie: <i>Hebridean Hale-Bop</i>
Tha mis 'air uisg 'an Ionain duibh	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Tha Mo Bhean ag OI	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha moit air son do leannain ort	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i>
Tha ruidhl' aig na tunnagan aka The Reel of Tulloch	MacDonald, 1917
Tha Sior chaoineadh air Beinn Dobhrain	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Tha T' Athair air an Daoraich	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Tha Thu Maol a Ghaoil, a Bhodaich	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha Thu Mar a Bha Thu Roimhe	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Lauchie Dan N. MacLellan
Tha Thusa Lom, Tana Crom	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Isabel MacIsaac
Tha thusa Luaidh	Cape Breton Gaelic Choir
Tha Toll air a' Bhata Mhor	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil and Isabel MacIsaac; Margaret Bennett; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i> ; The Gesto Collection
Tha Toll air a' Bhriogais	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tha tri chasan deiridh	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Thanaig lad, Thanaig lad	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
The Back of the Change House: see Cul an Tigh-osda; 'S ann an chuir am bodach feagal orm	
The big strong lad	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>

The boat leaking	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Bob of Fettercairn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Braes of Mar: see Feumaidh mi mo ghun a dheanamh; Ho ro nighean dubh, bheag a'chitsinn	
The Bridge of Perth: see Ho ma thuiteas, he ma thuiteas	
The burnt log	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Campbells are Coming : see Bha mi air banais am Bail' Ionar-aora	Mackintosh, 1916
The dusty miller	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The envious wife	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The fair wedding	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The foolish soldier	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Haughs of Cromdale	<i>The Gesto Collection; Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The high road to Linton	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Highland Wedding: see Dar a theid thu thar' a' mhoneaidh	
The Highland Wedding: see Nach truagh leat mi ma's droch bhean i	
The Hills/Braes of Glenorchy: see Loisg a'chailleach a casan air eibhleg	
The jealous woman	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Kilted Lads: see Gillean an Fheilidh	
The Lads of Mull: see Ho tha'n thombaca daor; Sud an rud a thogadh m' fhoon	
The Maid of Islay: see Thugaibh dram do Bhaldi Coillein; Tha gaath mhor air Loch-an-t-Seilich	
The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Marquis of Huntly's Highland Fling: see Maighdeannan a'Choire Dhuibh; A nighean og a'chota dhuibh; Na maighdeannan is boidhche cruth	
The mason's apron	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Miller of Drone: see Cairistiona Chaimbeul	
The Reel of Tulloch: see Tha ruidhl' aig na tunnagan	
The Rejected Suitor: see Am Pige Ruadh	
The Smith's a Gallant Fireman: see Tha mi dol a dheanamh banais	
The white cockade	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
The Wind that Shakes the Barley: see Chan fhaod Calum carachadh	
Theid mi 'Cheann Loch Alainn is fagaidh mi Tulach Odhar	<i>Tocher. 1990 #42:383; Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Theid mi null thar a'Bheinn	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Theid sinn similar to Macpherson's Lament	MacDonald, 1917
There is constant weeping in Ben Dorain	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Thogail a'Bhuntat	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>

Thoir a nall Ailean Thugam	Catherine-Ann MacPhee
Thubhairt an Luchag stigh's an toll	<i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Thugaibh dram do Bhaldi Coillein aka The Maid of Islay	MacDonald, 1917
Thuir an Gobha "Fuirichemaid"	<i>Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist</i>
Tighinn air a'Mhuir	<i>Eilean Fraoich</i> ; Cape Breton Gaelic Choir
Tubaist Ort a Dhomhnaill	St. Francis Xavier Gaelic Folklore Project: Joe Neil MacNeil
Tullochgorm	MacDonald, 1917; <i>Puirt-a-Beul</i>
Ubhi a bhi	<i>Tog Fonn</i> ; Parsons, Catriona

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW OUTLINES

B.1 Buchanan, Janet: August 7, 1998

Young native Cape Bretoner; Gaelic learner; singer; employed by hydro company.

- ◆ how she started singing Gaelic songs
- ◆ how she became involved with Michelle Smith and Bonnie Thompson
- ◆ kinds of venues in which she performed
- ◆ how she learns Gaelic songs
- ◆ how she chooses Gaelic song repertoire
- ◆ song sources
- ◆ puirt-a-beul (attraction, repertoire, difficulties; sets; origins; sources)
- ◆ accompanied Highland dancing with puirt-a-beul

B.2 Cameron, Alexander (Sandy): July 27, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; fiddler.

- ◆ Gaelic fluency
- ◆ how he started fiddling and process of learning tunes
- ◆ learned some fiddle tunes from hearing people singing them, including puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul repertoire
- ◆ trip to Scotland; Scottish fiddlers
- ◆ interest in Gaelic song and the “blas”
- ◆ Cape Breton “pop” Celtic music
- ◆ Gaelic song sources and Gaelic College
- ◆ connection between song and language
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ current popularity of dances

B.3 Carruthers, Margo: August 1, 1998

Middle-aged professional singer; Haligonian; Gaelic learner and teacher.

- ◆ teaching Gaelic
- ◆ how she became interested in Gaelic
- ◆ using song in Gaelic classes, learning puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul sources
- ◆ collections of milling songs; division of labour
- ◆ lack of contact with native Gaelic speakers in Halifax
- ◆ debates surrounding Celtic pop; Celtic pop’s ability to attract newcomers to the culture
- ◆ the *Tàlant nam Bàrd* project

- ◆ performing and recording as a Gaelic learner and non-Cape Bretoner
- ◆ language reflects a culture's worldview
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic – importance of song to its future

B.4 Conn, Stephanie: March 24, 1998

Young professional singer; MA in music; Torontonians; Gaelic learner.

- ◆ Janet Russell and Christine Kydd
- ◆ Mairi MacInnes
- ◆ appeal of puirt-a-beul to audience
- ◆ torn between emphasizing the language or music of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ learning puirt-a-beul respectfully
- ◆ choice of puirt-a-beul repertoire
- ◆ qualities needed to sing puirt-a-beul
- ◆ connection between step-dancing and puirt-a-beul performance
- ◆ Alec Francis MacKay (fiddle) compared to Christine Primrose (puirt-a-beul)
- ◆ types of dance and connection to puirt-a-beul
- ◆ origins of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and fiddling (blas)
- ◆ history/origins of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ Karen Matheson and Capercaillie
- ◆ Sileas
- ◆ Norman Kennedy
- ◆ differences between puirt-a-beul sung for dancing and puirt-a-beul sung for concerts
- ◆ difference between Cape Breton and Scottish cultural values
- ◆ how she became interested in Celtic music and dance
- ◆ musical pride and insider/outsider issues
- ◆ issues of appropriation
- ◆ differences between traditional Celtic music and Celtic pop

B.5 Dunn, Jackie: August 3, 1998

Young native Cape Bretoner; fiddler and step-dancer; teacher; no Gaelic.

- ◆ undergraduate thesis
- ◆ knowledge of Gaelic
- ◆ connection between music and language
- ◆ changes to be made to thesis prior to publication
- ◆ authenticity of Cape Breton fiddle tradition
- ◆ origins and purpose of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ connection between fiddling and dancing
- ◆ future of Cape Breton fiddling
- ◆ competition
- ◆ styles of fiddling

- ◆ changes in Cape Breton fiddling
- ◆ square dances and changes to them
- ◆ changes in step-dancing
- ◆ publications (fiddle; scholarly; puirt-a-beul)

B.6 “FW”: January 15, 1998

Young Torontonians; advanced Gaelic learner; singer.

- ◆ how she learned Gaelic
- ◆ how she became involved in music (classical and Gaelic)
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ Gaelic song performance and Mods
- ◆ categories of Gaelic song
- ◆ history of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul vocabularies and types of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ examples of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ Cape Breton attitudes towards puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and dance
- ◆ puirt-a-beul singers
- ◆ differences between Gaelic song in Cape Breton and Scotland
- ◆ mod adjudication
- ◆ qualities of a good Gaelic singer
- ◆ instrumental accompaniment of Gaelic song and music

B.7 Gillis, Mary Jack: June 22, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker.

- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ milling frolics
- ◆ step-dancing
- ◆ puirt-a-beul
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ how she met her husband and personal history
- ◆ decline of Gaelic
- ◆ fiddling and dancing
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and jigging
- ◆ trip to Scotland

B.8 Gillis, Neil John: July 2, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer.

- ◆ never sang puirt-a-beul since they were bawdy
- ◆ loves other Gaelic songs but never interested in puirt-a-beul
- ◆ description of ceilidhs and milling competitions
- ◆ disappearance of ceilidhs

- ◆ fewer fiddlers in his youth; he never tried to play fiddle himself
- ◆ description of dances
- ◆ brief description of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ description of ceilidhs
- ◆ Mods
- ◆ importance of song to the culture
- ◆ milling songs, frolics, and dances at milling frolics
- ◆ discussion of bawdy puirt-a-beul and their general unpopularity
- ◆ Neil John's trip to Scotland; general discussion of trips overseas

B.9 Lamond, Mary Jane: August 3, 1998

Young professional singer; advanced Gaelic learner; grandparents were Gaelic speakers from Cape Breton.

- ◆ negative attitudes towards puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul are more Scottish than Cape Breton
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and women
- ◆ puirt-a-beul as cultural entry point
- ◆ choice of puirt-a-beul repertoire on albums
- ◆ decline of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton
- ◆ origins of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and dance
- ◆ reception of *Suas e!*
- ◆ how she became involved in Gaelic language and song
- ◆ how she started recording
- ◆ responsibility to the culture
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic

B.10 Livingston-Lowe, David: March 10, 1998

Young Torontonians; fluent Gaelic learner and teacher.

- ◆ his start in Gaelic language and culture
- ◆ experience at Gaelic College in St. Ann's
- ◆ involvement with Gaelic in Toronto
- ◆ teaching Gaelic language classes
- ◆ learning and teaching Gaelic songs
- ◆ Celtic pop as motivator for people to learn Gaelic
- ◆ "blàs na Gàidhlig"
- ◆ current popularity of Celtic music
- ◆ broad appeal of Celtic culture
- ◆ puirt-a-beul origin theories
- ◆ vocables in milling songs versus puirt-a-beul
- ◆ Cape Breton milling songs and frolics

- ◆ experience accompanying Scottish country dancing with puirt-a-beul sung by choir

B.11 MacDonald, Jeffrey: July 22, 1998

Young native Cape Bretoner; fluent Gaelic learner and teacher; singer.

- ◆ early involvement in Gaelic culture
- ◆ process of learning Gaelic language and Celtic Studies degree
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ current popularity of Cape Breton Gaelic culture
- ◆ Cape Breton Gaelic song recordings
- ◆ involvement in Gaelic song
- ◆ qualities of a good Gaelic singer
- ◆ differences between Gaelic and English songs
- ◆ description, definition, and purpose of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul origins
- ◆ bawdy puirt-a-beul
- ◆ appropriate use of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ changes in Gaelic song repertoire and mods
- ◆ puirt-a-beul is more popular in Scotland
- ◆ puirt-a-beul repertoire

B.12 MacDonald, Kay: August 10, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; hosted Gaelic radio programme.

- ◆ involvement with “Island Echoes,” a weekly Gaelic culture radio programme
- ◆ choice of repertoire played on show
- ◆ popularity of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton
- ◆ recording the puirt-a-beul project with Dougie MacPhee and Joe Neil MacNeil
- ◆ growing up in Gaelic community
- ◆ personal interest in puirt-a-beul and definition
- ◆ future of Gaelic in Cape Breton and teaching Gaelic classes
- ◆ value of language to culture
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ Gaelic song venues and milling frolics
- ◆ Mods

B.13 MacDonnell, Donald: July 27, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer.

- ◆ learning English and speaking Gaelic at school
- ◆ early involvement in Gaelic songs and milling frolics
- ◆ choosing and learning milling song repertoire

- ◆ parents were Gaelic singers
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and jigging

B.14 MacEachen, Frances: July 16, 1998

Young native Cape Bretoner; Gaelic learner; editor of Am Bràighe.

- ◆ (un)popularity of Gaelic and learning it
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ definition of Gaelic culture
- ◆ role of music in Gaelic culture
- ◆ Gaelic learners singing traditional songs
- ◆ role of Cape Breton recording artists and affect on Gaelic culture
- ◆ definition of ceilidhs and changes over time
- ◆ Gaelic song venues
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and their decline in Cape Breton
- ◆ difficulties of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ attraction of puirt-a-beul to fiddlers
- ◆ mods

B.15 MacKinnon, Anna: June 22, 1998

Middle-aged native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; employed at The Bear Paw, Inverness.

- ◆ description of recorded ceilidh which included puirt-a-beul
- ◆ family singers (father and uncle)
- ◆ use of puirt-a-beul for putting children to sleep and for dancing
- ◆ dances and frolics
- ◆ “blàs”
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ Cape Breton Celtic pop
- ◆ step-dancing
- ◆ definition and attitudes towards puirt-a-beul

B.16 MacLean, Peter Jack: July 22, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer.

- ◆ exposure to Gaelic language and song from mother (a singer)
- ◆ ceilidhs in the past and changes in the present
- ◆ learning Gaelic
- ◆ future of Gaelic
- ◆ mods – a valuable opportunity for learners so long as language is emphasized
- ◆ milling frolics and milling repertoire
- ◆ minimal puirt-a-beul heard in past
- ◆ value of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ current popularity of puirt-a-beul

- ◆ Cape Breton Celtic music recordings
- ◆ ceilidh repertoires
- ◆ origins and purpose of puirt-a-beul

B.17 MacLellan, Duncan: July 27, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; father was bard.

- ◆ life on Margaree Island
- ◆ speaking Gaelic and learning English
- ◆ father's compositions and interest in Gaelic song
- ◆ learning Gaelic songs and performance
- ◆ milling frolics
- ◆ unfamiliar with puirt-a-beul
- ◆ "blàs na Gàidhlig"
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ Gaelic music venues
- ◆ ceilidhs

B.18 MacLellan, Rhodena: June 29, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker.

- ◆ parents' Gaelic songs and singing
- ◆ learning Gaelic songs
- ◆ milling frolics
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ learning English and speaking Gaelic
- ◆ current popularity and future of Gaelic
- ◆ Celtic pop music
- ◆ dancing
- ◆ familiarity with puirt-a-beul; description; definition; origins
- ◆ puirt-a-beul repertoire
- ◆ ceilidhs and frolics
- ◆ maintenance of Gaelic
- ◆ dances and picnics

B.19 MacNeil, Beth: July 22, 1998

Middle-aged native Cape Bretoner; Gaelic learner and teacher; singer; employed by The Highland Village, Iona.

- ◆ learning and teaching Gaelic
- ◆ English and Gaelic song background
- ◆ sources of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ association of puirt-a-beul with children
- ◆ performing puirt-a-beul and audience reaction
- ◆ learning puirt-a-beul

- ◆ Gaelic song resources
- ◆ future of Gaelic in Cape Breton
- ◆ Mods and competition
- ◆ opportunities to sing Gaelic songs
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ definition of puirt-a-beul and origins
- ◆ inclusion of puirt-a-beul on Celtic pop recordings
- ◆ puirt-a-beul repertoire

B.20 MacNeil, James: July 23, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer.

- ◆ learning Gaelic
- ◆ involvement in Gaelic song
- ◆ milling frolics and popularity of milling songs
- ◆ mods
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ definition of – and membership in – Gaelic culture
- ◆ promotion of Gaelic culture
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ parents' singing
- ◆ purpose and definition of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ differences between puirt-a-beul and milling songs
- ◆ puirt-a-beul singers
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and dancing
- ◆ Cape Breton Celtic pop and the inclusion of puirt-a-beul on recordings

B.21 MacNeil, Malcolm (Maxie): June 29, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer.

- ◆ conflicting definitions of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ definition of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ decline of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ “blàs na Gàidhlig”
- ◆ popularity of puirt-a-beul recordings
- ◆ mods
- ◆ future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ participation in *Fèis nan Òran*
- ◆ ceilidhs
- ◆ learning Gaelic songs
- ◆ learning Gaelic language
- ◆ milling frolics
- ◆ preserving Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ popularity of Cape Breton Celtic music

- ◆ Scottish interest in Cape Breton
- ◆ Gaelic education
- ◆ origins of puirt-a-beul and connection to dancing

B.22 MacNeil, Roddie C.: June 15, 1998

Retired native Cape Bretoner; native Gaelic speaker; singer and amateur fiddler.

- ◆ Gaelic songs with vocable choruses
- ◆ definition of mouth music
- ◆ milling songs and frolics
- ◆ differences between vocable songs and intelligible songs
- ◆ lack of puirt-a-beul repertoire
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and fiddle tunes

B.23 MacRitchie, Rhoda: February 2, 1998

Retired Torontonian (originally from the Isle of Harris, Scotland); native Gaelic speaker and teacher; singer.

- ◆ Kenna Campbell radio interview and translation
- ◆ mods
- ◆ teaching puirt-a-beul
- ◆ Gaelic song accompaniment
- ◆ puirt-a-beul repertoire and sources
- ◆ puirt-a-beul and dance
- ◆ differences between waulking songs and puirt-a-beul
- ◆ vocables and diddling
- ◆ puirt-a-beul singers
- ◆ Gaelic involvement in Toronto
- ◆ differences between Cape Breton and Scottish Gaelic culture

B.24 McCormack, Rosemary: June 13, 1998

Middle-aged Cape Bretoner (originally from South Uist, Scotland); native Gaelic speaker; co-owner of B&R Heritage Enterprises, Iona.

- ◆ Gaelic song collecting in Scotland
- ◆ similarities and differences between Cape Breton and Scottish Gaelic communities
- ◆ decline of women's Gaelic songs
- ◆ gender divisions in traditional Gaelic culture
- ◆ future of Gaelic
- ◆ choice of recording projects and singers
- ◆ Celtic pop
- ◆ marketing B&R Heritage Enterprises recordings
- ◆ choice of recording repertoire
- ◆ milling competitions

B.25 Murray, Patricia: January 13, 1998

Young professional singer from Prince Edward Island; Gaelic learner; winner of the Royal National Mod (Scotland) Silver Pendant.

- ◆ singing background and conflict between Celtic and classical music
- ◆ trip to Scotland – taking Gaelic song lessons from Gaelic singers
- ◆ traditional vs. Celtic pop debate
- ◆ trip to Scotland
- ◆ competing at the National Mod (Inverness, 1997)
- ◆ taking Gaelic song lessons in Toronto
- ◆ Scottish ceilidh dancing
- ◆ experiences with puirt-a-beul; learning them

B.26 Parsons, Catriona: August 27, 1998

Middle-aged Cape Bretoner (originally from Lewis, Scotland); native Gaelic speaker and teacher; singer; employed by St. Francis Xavier University and St. Ann's Gaelic College.

- ◆ first experiences in Cape Breton and emigrating there from Scotland
- ◆ Gaelic involvement while living in the USA
- ◆ becoming involved with St. Francis Xavier University and the Gaelic College
- ◆ University of Edinburgh graduate studies in linguistics
- ◆ musical and family background
- ◆ learning Gaelic songs and Gaelic song sources
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and fiddle tunes
- ◆ attitudes towards puirt-a-beul
- ◆ decline of puirt-a-beul in Cape Breton
- ◆ difficulties of singing puirt-a-beul
- ◆ puirt-a-beul singers
- ◆ Cape Breton Gaelic song recordings
- ◆ issues of cultural representation
- ◆ drawing the line between traditional singing and Celtic pop
- ◆ future of Gaelic in Cape Breton
- ◆ puirt-a-beul's origins

B.27 Primrose, Christine: July 12-13, 1998

Middle aged professional singer from Lewis, Scotland; native Gaelic speaker; employed by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye, Scotland).

- ◆ Gaelic song background and song culture on the Isle of Lewis
- ◆ Mod competitions
- ◆ Scottish ceilidhs and superstitions
- ◆ singing at others' requests
- ◆ sources of new Gaelic song repertoire

- ◆ defining traditional and folk music
- ◆ puirt-a-beul sources; lack of puirt-a-beul repertoire in Lewis
- ◆ learning puirt-a-beul
- ◆ definition and origins of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ survival of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ choosing puirt-a-beul to record and perform
- ◆ qualities of good puirt-a-beul singing
- ◆ audience reception of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ arrangements of puirt-a-beul
- ◆ future of Gaelic culture and the role of song
- ◆ international students at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (Gaelic College on the Isle of Skye)

B.28 Watson, James: July 17, 1998

Middle-aged Cape Bretoner originally from the United States; fluent Gaelic learner and teacher; singer; Gaelic culture researcher; employed by The Highland Village, Iona.

- ◆ differences between “Celtic” and “Gaelic” culture
- ◆ impact of popular Cape Breton groups on Gaelic culture
- ◆ maintaining Gaelic song and the future of Cape Breton Gaelic
- ◆ becoming involved with Gaelic culture
- ◆ ceilidhs and use of the term
- ◆ types of Gaelic songs and changes to them
- ◆ Gaelic song venues
- ◆ milling frolics
- ◆ native Cape Breton Gaelic singers with puirt-a-beul repertoire
- ◆ “blàs”
- ◆ definition of puirt-a-beul and decline in Cape Breton
- ◆ connection between puirt-a-beul and dance

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background:

How did you become interested in learning Gaelic (for learners)? or What role did Gaelic play in your life (for native speakers)?

How did you become interested in Gaelic song/music?

How do you learn Gaelic songs?

Where do you get your Gaelic songs?

What do you think the future of Gaelic in Cape Breton is?

How should Gaelic be promoted (i.e. through schools, festivals, evening classes, etc)?

Puirt-a-beul

What is your definition of puirt-a-beul?

What do you think its origins are?

Why does puirt-a-beul not seem to be as popular in Cape Breton as in Scotland?

What do you think of puirt-a-beul?

How many puirt-a-beul do you know and what are their names? Can you sing them for me?

Where did you learn them? What are your puirt-a-beul sources?

Where do you sing them?

Where have you heard puirt-a-beul?

Have you ever seen puirt-a-beul accompany dancing?

Who do you think is a particularly good singer of puirt-a-beul?

Popular Music

How do you feel about artists such as The Rankin Family, The Barra MacNeils, Mary Jane Lamond, Ashley MacIsaac, and Natalie MacMaster?

Have they contributed to the Cape Breton Gaelic culture in any way? Why/why not?

What attracts their listeners?

Mods

Why haven't Mods been as successful here as they have been in Scotland?

How do Mods (not) contribute to the Cape Breton Gaelic culture?

Conclusion

Would you like to add anything else?

APPENDIX D GAELIC SONG TYPES

The focus of this thesis on puirt-a-beul may give the false impression that puirt-a-beul are the predominant song type in Cape Breton. While puirt-a-beul are not difficult to find, many other types of Gaelic song are also performed. My consultants' attitudes toward and comments regarding puirt-a-beul are based in part upon their understanding of how puirt-a-beul compares with other Gaelic song types. For example, in Chapter 6.6, I argue that some expressions of negative attitudes towards puirt-a-beul are a result of a belief that puirt-a-beul do not compare to other song types, such as Òrain Mhòra and milling songs. Therefore, in order to understand puirt-a-beul properly, it is important to have a general understanding of Scottish Gaelic song and the following is an overview of some of the various types.

The earliest song cycles (Ulster, Arthurian, and Ossianic) are not included since these were not among the sung repertoire during my fieldwork in Cape Breton (which is not to say that they are not sung there, but at the very least, they do not appear to be sung frequently). For further information about these songs, see Collinson (1966:35-50) and Bruford ("Gaelic Bards" 1979). The focus here is on song types which are still frequently heard today and were generally composed from the seventeenth century on. Since the song types recognized in this thesis are based on categorizations made by outside scholars, some emic (i.e., indigenously-defined categories may have been overlooked.

According to scholars such as Margaret Fay Shaw, Alan Bruford, James Ross, and Francis Collinson, there are several kinds of Gaelic song. Unfortunately, each scholar categorizes them according to different criteria. Ross laments, "one of the major barriers

to the analytic discussion of any folk-song culture is the lack of a definitive terminology” (1957:95). Ross categorizes songs according to theme, function, structure, and folk aetiology although he concedes that some songs could be considered examples of more than one category. James Ross’s classification is the most detailed and comprehensive (based on a study of more than 2000 Gaelic songs) of any categorization system I have encountered. He breaks Gaelic songs down as follows (cf. “A Classification of Gaelic Folk-Song,” 1957):

1. Theme
 - 1.1 Songs with an inter-sexual aspect
 - 1.1.1 Love songs (general)
 - 1.1.2 Matchmaking songs
 - 1.1.3 Night visit songs
 - 1.1.4 Pregnancy songs
 - 1.1.5 Rejection songs
 - 1.1.6 Tàmait (complaints)
 - 1.2 Songs relating to the physical environment
 - 1.2.1 Hunting songs
 - 1.2.2 Homeland songs
 - 1.2.3 Topographical songs
 - 1.3 Panegyric
 - 1.3.1 Eulogy
 - 1.3.2 Elegy
 - 1.3.3 Lament
 - 1.4 Satire
 - 1.4.1 Aoir
 - 1.4.2 Flyting
 - 1.5 Songs of miscellaneous themes
 - 1.5.1 Religious songs
 - 1.5.2 Bacchanalia
 - 1.5.3 Jacobite songs
 - 1.5.4 Merry songs
2. Song Structure
 - 2.1 Ballads
 - 2.1.1 Heroic ballads
 - 2.1.2 Sailors’ ballads (place-name songs)
 - 2.1.3 Soldiers’ ballads
 - 2.2 Macaronics

- 2.3 Pibroch songs
- 2.4 Puirt-a-beul
- 3. Folk Aetiology
 - 3.1 Fairy Songs
- 4. Song Function
 - 4.1 Songs associated with ritual
 - 4.1.1 Duain Challuinn (Hogmanay songs)
 - 4.1.2 Eòlais (Charms and Incantations)
 - 4.2 Occupational songs
 - 4.2.1 Cradle songs
 - 4.2.2 Milking songs
 - 4.2.3 Orain Basaidh (Palming or clapping songs)
 - 4.2.4 Rowing songs
 - 4.2.5 Spinning songs

Some songs could be categorized in several different ways, such as milling/waulking songs which one would expect would be classified under “song function” but which Ross categorizes according to theme. He argues that while the term “waulking song” is “frequently used in discussions about traditional Gaelic song, it has not been given generic status in this classification because of the wide variety of themes and structures which are found in this tradition” (1957:97-98) and because “classification would be pointless because of the great variety of songs which have apparently been borrowed and bent to this function” (1957:136). Ross insists that all four of his Gaelic song categories are distinct and necessary.

Although Collinson refers to the information presented in Ross’s article, he categorizes Gaelic song differently (cf. *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, 1966):

- I Early Gaelic Song Music
 - a) ballads
 - b) songs in syllabic and stressed metres
 - c) laments

- II Gaelic Labour Songs
 - a) waulking/milling songs
 - b) reaping songs
 - c) rowing songs
 - d) grinding songs
 - e) spinning songs
 - f) milking songs
 - g) churning songs
 - h) lullabies

- III General Gaelic Songs
 - a) puirt-a-beul
 - b) fairy songs

He begins by documenting the earliest extant Gaelic song, generally composed by hereditary bards. He then moves to “labour songs,” which he divides into communal and solitary labour songs. His final category of “general Gaelic songs” appears to contain those song types that he could not fit into previous categories. Margaret Fay Shaw, Alexander Carmichael, and Frances Tolmie—to name but a few other Gaelic song scholars—have all categorized Gaelic song differently from each other and from the models cited above.

During the early and middle parts of this century, ethnomusicologist attempted to be scientific about music by classifying the different kinds to be found in a given culture. Ideally, classification systems result in a better understanding of how music is constructed and functions within a culture. Furthermore, classification systems could conceivably aid a comparison between several cultures’ musics, resulting in a better understanding of how distinct musics differ from one another and/or where they overlap.

Unfortunately, classification systems have limitations. As with both Ross and Collinson, classifiers have rarely been able to suggest a system that adequately accounts

for every type of music within a culture without being too general to be useful. Additionally, many types of music can be considered appropriate in more than one category. For example, in Ross's system, waulking songs are not considered a distinct song type distinguished by function. Instead, waulking songs are divided up among various categories based on them. Moreover classification systems are rarely completely satisfactory in that they generally include a "miscellaneous" category. Most systems cannot account for every song within a given culture. Finally, many classification systems are devised by scholars rather than by cultural insiders. Academic categories may not reflect those that an insider would identify. Despite the problems of classification systems, Ross's is used here as practical means of organizing a discussion about Gaelic song types.

Although Ross and Collinson are describing kinds of Gaelic song extant in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, many (if not all) have been sung in Cape Breton at one time or another—and many continue to be sung today—although the specific songs in the living repertoire often differ, as may their use and/or popularity.

D.1 Òran Mòr

Òran Mòr literally translates as "Great Song" and generally refers to the songs "of the vernacular poets of the seventeenth century—songs of eulogy of the great Highland Chiefs of the day who were the patrons or clan chiefs of the poets in question, enlarging upon their power, their princely hospitality and their prowess in battle" (Collinson 1966:51). In Cape Breton, Òrain Mhòra [plural spelling] are generally regarded as the pinnacle of the Gaelic song repertoire. They feature a regular pattern of stressed and

unstressed syllables whereas the syllabic metre employed in earlier song types did not necessarily conform to a regular pattern.

The bardic composers of many of these songs are still known in oral tradition: “Unlike the folk music of many other countries, much of what is accepted as folk music in Scotland is of known authorship” (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. Scotland: Folk Music: Definition). Although the large majority of bards in both Ireland and Scotland were men, there were a few Scottish women bards who remain well known today, although “their trespassing on male preserves by composing songs outside the waulking tradition seems to have been regarded in Scotland as little short of witchcraft” (Bruford “Gaelic Bards” 1979:5).¹

With the elimination of hereditary bards, the bardic tradition was carried on by those who worked with words in their employment such as teachers and clerics, as well as some minor gentry and farmers. Poetry was mostly written to be sung and therefore many poems that were written down bear the names of their tunes, usually well-known although the detail and tempo might be so altered as to render the tune almost unrecognizable (Bruford “Gaelic Bards” 1979:7).

Currently, there are few bards composing poetry and song, particularly in Cape Breton. However, on Margo Carruthers’s CD, *Tàlant nam Bàrd* (Talent of the Bards), which celebrates bards of Cape Breton, Allister MacGillivray is recognized as a living bard. Although he composes songs in English, he writes about Cape Breton and has also

¹ Bruford notes that there were three well-known women song composers in seventeenth-century Scotland: Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh (Mary Macleod), Silis na Ceapaich, and Mairead nighean Lachainn, two of whom were buried face down, indicating that they were considered witches (“Gaelic Bards” 1979:5). Collinson describes how Mary Macleod was banished from Dunvegan because she “composed a song

published books documenting the fiddle and step dance tradition in Cape Breton (*The Cape Breton Fiddler*, 1981 and *The Cape Breton Ceilidh*, 1988). MacGillivray's most popular song, "Song for the Mira," was translated into Gaelic by Rosemary McCormack, producer of *Tàlant nam Bàrd*, for inclusion on the CD.

Òrain Mhòra are the ruler against which all other types of Gaelic song are measured. They constitute the "high poetry" of Gaelic culture since, until recently, all poetry was written with the understanding that it would be sung. There was no division between the great Gaelic songs and great Gaelic poetry. *Puirt-a-beul*, which are not composed by bards and which emphasize musical qualities over lyric ones, do not compare to the great songs, and this may be part of the reason for the negative attitudes discussed in Chapter 6.6.

D.2 Relationship songs

Ross identifies three different types of love songs: those which are part of the waulking/milling tradition, presented from the women's point of view and generally of no known authorship; those which arose from the literary or bardic tradition; and current compositions which more often than not address a place rather than a person (Ross 1957:99-101). The first type is the most numerous and the most often sung. These songs contain subjective descriptions of a lover's attributes with a "great virility of expression" (Ross 1957:100). "Pregnancy songs" boast of the father's attributes: "the lover is then eulogised and the willingness to bear him several children may be expressed" (Ross

which displeased her employer" (1966:53). She later composed another song in praise of her chief and was thereafter invited to return, but only on the condition that she never compose another song (54),

1957:106). Once the wool had been milled, “it was customary to sing dialogue songs in which the leader matched a member of the waulking group with a certain man. The named girl sang a reply, which was derisive if the leader’s choice was unacceptable to her, or eulogistic if she favoured him” (Ross 1957:102).

Love songs not associated with the milling frolic include “night visit songs,” which tell of lovers meeting secretly. Occasionally, they tell of a married woman warning her lover away (Ross 1957:103-105). “Complaint songs” or *Tàmairt* complain about “personal insults or imagined or real persecution by other members of the community” (Ross 1957:109). Ross includes them as “inter-sexual” songs because “the most frequent source of a *Tàmairt* is a seduction, subsequent pregnancy, and abandonment by a lover” (1957:109).

D.3 Songs relating to the physical environment

Although this song type is an old one (Ross 1957:109), it is perhaps not surprising that many nostalgic songs in praise of Scotland were written during the nineteenth century when Highlanders were emigrating in large numbers to North America and Australia. Ross identifies two main types of “homeland” songs: one is written by emigrants, the other “by people who have not been forced to leave the environment of their youth, but who have remained and watched that environment change” as when the landlords began to raise sheep where people once worked the land (Ross 1957:111).

In the category of “songs relating to the physical environment,” Ross includes hunting songs. Although the term “hunting song” might suggest that they are an occupational song, they actually “deal largely with hunting reminiscences and these

frequently develop into longer passages of a topographical kind. The hunting reference is quite often an allusion only, within the larger context of a topographical passage” (Ross 1957:111). Of course, there are also songs which do not depend upon the hunting allusion to discuss nature; instead, some songs are unabashedly “topographical,” otherwise known as “nature songs.” Ross believes both the hunting and topographical songs to have descended orally from high Gaelic poetry:

In speaking of a “poetic” origin in this context, we mean that a composition aims at its aesthetic objective primarily through devices of language and speech rhythms, and that the melody is incidental only. The melody is not composed by the poet but is chosen by him from well-known traditional airs. A melody for the poem is chosen at all only out of deference to a tradition that requires the singing of all poetic compositions (1957:113-114).

D.4 Eulogies, Elegies, and Laments

On the whole, eulogies and elegies were the domain of bards and not a part of “folksong” *per se*. Scholars such as Alan Bruford do not recognize a “folk” eulogy and elegy category. However, Ross suggests that “sub-literary” forms of each exist. Eulogies, of course, praise the living while elegies praise the dead. Ross differentiates the literary eulogy from the “folk” eulogy by the fact that the latter “refer only to the immediate social unit, whereas the reference of the literary eulogy is frequently to a wider unit” by means of references to relatives, alliances, and other people (1957:115). The literary elegy is characterized by its constant emphasis “on the qualities of the subject in life and the desolation caused by his death. While the poet frequently stresses in an exaggerated way the grief of others, his own sorrow is not emphasised” (Ross 1957:116). On the other hand, the “folk” elegy (which is collapsed into the category of “lament” by

Bruford) gives “a personal reaction to the death of a loved one (even if in fact they may have been written by someone else)” (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5).

Folk elegies have been preserved mainly as waulking songs:

No doubt many of these were composed by women, but in some instances where the inter-sexual imagery is incidental only, they may not have originated as love songs. Centuries of oral transmission within a strictly feminine culture would undoubtedly bring changes of a particular kind, and the introduction of love imagery into eulogies of local chieftains would be an expected development (Ross 1957:116).

The lament is also the domain of women and is closely related to the elegy. Ross, however, explains that “in the elegy, death tends to be a kind of ‘lying in state’, a condition which does not necessarily impair the dignity of the subject, whereas the lament makes no attempt to lessen the impact of death” (1957:118). Explicit details regarding the means of a person’s death or the state of the corpse are not avoided (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:6). Laments frequently make oblique references to death, such as “your fiddle is untuned” and “your dogs are on the leash and not taken to the moors” while others refer to the accessories of death, such as the coffin, bier, and shroud (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:6).

Laments are generally considered women’s songs. They are generally descriptive of a woman’s point of view, presumably composed at the height of grief over the loss of a loved one, usually the woman’s spouse. However, it is not impossible that some of these may have been composed by men. Today, they can be heard as part of the milling song repertoire, as well as on recordings from Scotland and Cape Breton.

Bruford argues that laments have a specialized group of vocables, different from those used in other song genres (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5) except, presumably, when lullabies and laments are one and the same (cf Appendix D.12).

Collinson adds another type of song to this category: mourning or funeral songs. According to Collinson, professional mourning-women sang the virtues of the dead person, mourned him or her, and ensured “their happy passage to the next world” (1966:113). Two types of mourning songs were sung: one inside the house (well-known as “keening,” particularly in Ireland) and one sung during the procession to the burial ground (Collinson 1966:113).

D.5 Satire

Ross defines two types of satirical songs: the *aoir* and the “flyting” (1957:119). The former was “a well-known and much feared poetic genre during the mediaeval bardic period of Irish literature” (Ross 1957:119). It has survived into the present, despite the collapse of the hereditary bardic system, although they are not common. The *aoir* “is largely a poem of abuse in which the composer expresses enmity and malevolence towards his subject. No examples of any antiquity seem to survive and singers are chary of recording many of the modern compositions for fear of injury to the subject or his relatives” (Ross 1957:119). Relatively recent satires tend to be aimed at non-Gaelic enemies too far away to hear the songs or they make more gentle fun of local incidents or local people (Bruford “Gaelic Bards” 1979:8).

The flyting, “in which different bards hurled insults at one another in a series of poems” (Bruford “Gaelic Bards” 1979:8), has also survived since medieval times (mainly

as a part of the waulking tradition). Flytings are “not so much personal encounters as slanging matches between representatives of districts or clans, and the scurrilous attacks of a personal kind, characteristic of the [Lowland] Scots flyting, are not prominent in them” (Ross 1957:120).

D.6 Songs of miscellaneous themes

Under this category, Ross identifies *òran math* (or “pious song”) which were sung by Presbyterians outside of the church context:

These songs were never sung in church or at any religious service but were performed at gatherings in private houses. At a time when there was a strong religious feeling against secular songs, and against instrumental music of all kinds, these songs must have occupied an important place in the evening’s proceedings at many cèilidh houses (Ross 1957:122).

Religious songs are also known in Catholic areas, particularly as a result of the publication by Alexander Carmichael, although “what proportion of them were song as distinct from recitative is not clear” (Ross 1957:122) since Carmichael did not include music with his transcriptions, and he was not always careful to note which items in *Carmina Gadelica* were songs and which were not.

Ross also identifies “bacchanalia songs” otherwise known as “drinking songs.” These either praise “the subject’s capacity for imbibing liquor ... [or] his generosity in distributing it to others” (1957:123). A few songs about whisky celebrate “the joys of drink and the conviviality it engenders” (Ross 1957:123).

Songs about the Jacobite rebellions are also mentioned, although Ross notes that most of these were composed after the event and, surprisingly, few were written at the time of these events (1957:124).

Finally, “merry songs” or humorous songs tended “to be of a parochial nature, although the themes, such as depredations of rats, the scarcity of commodities such as tobacco, the first motor car of the district, etc., can be universal” (Ross 1957:125).

Although Ross acknowledges that humorous songs may encompass a variety of themes, he categorizes them together because “they share the important thematic characteristic of humorous intent” (1957:125).

D.7 Ballads

Ross reasons that the early heroic poems, including the Ossianic poems based on early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts, should be considered ballads. At the same time, he is not of the opinion that Gaelic ballads are the same as English ballads:

They reveal none of the constants which Gerould found to characterise the essential ballad. Although, as far as we can gather, they originated at about the same time as the ballad form, and may, as literary fashion, owe something to the Germanic ballad tradition, they are basically different in rhetoric and subject matter. They deal with different themes in being largely limited to the glorification of Fionn and his warriors. In their development of these themes they lack the terseness and the drama of the typical ballad. The obvious bias of the poet, who is frequently a participant in the events described, and the overall lack of human interest so prominent in the ballads, completes the dissimilarity (Ross 1957:127-128).

More recent ballads, which Ross calls “sailors’ ballads” and “soldiers’ ballads” are narrative but also present the personal experience of the composer. The former refer to sea voyages and the latter describe “some phase of the singer’s military career” (Ross 1957:128-129).

D.8 Macaronics

There is not much to say about this type of Gaelic song except that it combines both the English and Gaelic languages, usually for humorous effect (Ross 1957:130). They first began to appear in Scotland in the eighteenth century (Ross 1957:130) and they have been composed in both Cape Breton (cf. Creighton 1964:26-30) and Newfoundland (cf. Bennett 1989:172-3). In the former example, English is spoken by a character in the song who has returned to Cape Breton from Boston but refuses to speak Gaelic, which she considers inferior to English. The remainder of the song is in Gaelic. In the latter example, Gaelic is mixed with English because the Gaels of the Codroy Valley in Newfoundland interacted with Natives and Irish regularly; songs were composed multilingually in order to include as many community members as possible.

D.9 Pibroch songs, Canntaireachd, and Songs Related to Piping

Canntaireachd is an elaborate system of vocables used to transmit “pibroch” (*ceòl mòr* or the “great” piping tunes) orally. A looser system of canntaireachd is also sometimes used by pipers and others to sing *ceòl beag*, or the “little” bagpipe music: music of the dance hall and parade-ground (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:8). There is a third type of bagpipe music in between *ceòl mòr* and *ceòl beag* known, appropriately enough, as *ceòl meadhonach* (or “middle music”). Generally, these tunes are adapted from Gaelic songs (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:8).

Finally, there are songs set to pibroch tunes that have words referring to the story behind the tune. Some singers may add a bit of canntaireachd at the end as well (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:8). There are some songs that seem to be based on pibroch but

for which no corresponding pibroch is known (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:8). Ross observes that pibroch songs have some similarities to *puirt-a-beul*:

The words of the pibroch songs are usually very repetitive. Where it keeps to the subject of a pibroch, it is content to reiterate key phrases and the subject is never developed in detail as an elegiac or descriptive poem. From this aspect of textual repetition it superficially resembles the *port-a-beul*. In the *port-a-beul*, however, the same melody can find expression in a variety of texts, whereas in the pibroch song, the text, although scanty, is frequently related to the origin of the piece of music that inspired it. This association between text and melody does not exist in the *port-a-beul*. Even where the pibroch song text cannot be related to the subject of the pibroch, it seems to have greater continuity than the *port-a-beul*, which is more transitory (1957:131).

Ross also warns against confusing pibroch songs with eighteenth century poems “metrically based on the rhythms of a pibroch’s movements” (1957:132). He contends that these poems

are not textually related to any given pibroch and their purpose is never to perpetuate the subject or melody of a pibroch. ... [T]he purpose of this type of poetic construction seems to have been to create a poem, which, in relation to poetry composed in the commoner metres, had the greatness which pibroch essentially has in relation to the lesser music of the bagpipes (1957:132).

D.10 Fairy songs

Although one might expect fairy songs to be classified under “theme,” Ross separates them since they are the only class based entirely on an indigenous categorization. Collinson reports that fairy songs are “in a curious way always looked upon by the Gael as a class of music apart from the rest” (1966:101). This category is therefore important because it is an indigenous category, rather than one imposed by an outsider. Essentially, fairy songs are those that have an accompanying story which describe the supernatural origins of the given song (Ross 1957:133-134). There is nothing musically or lyrically unique about these songs; “it is merely the song a fairy

sang in a certain situation, and for this information we depend upon a traditional account of its origin which is given by the singer of the song” (Ross 1957:134). Collinson prefers additionally to include songs that refer to a relationship between a human and a fairy, which might be from either being’s perspective (1966:104). According to Collinson, while many fairy songs bewail “a tragic love-affair between a fairy and a mortal,” some may be fairy charms and predictions (1966:104, 107).

Both Bruford (“Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5) and Ross (1957:135) mention that fairy songs are frequently laments in terms of theme, and they are “almost invariably found as cradle songs” (Ross 1957:135).

D.11 Songs associated with ritual

In terms of songs categorized according to function, Ross differentiates between songs associated with ritual which “in no way constitute a melodic or rhythmic punctuation of physical movements” whereas occupational songs “are used as accompaniments to the physical rhythms of labour” (1957:137). Essentially, Ross identifies Hogmanay (or New Year) songs, which were recited outside of a house before entering it, and another once the house had been entered. Other ritual songs include *Eòlais* (charms and incantations), which are

rhymed incantations which invoked the assistance of the saints to combat diseases or disorders of the body, the influence of the evil eye, to give power to maledictions, and to assist in the successful prosecution of such activities as churning, smoorring [sic], and kindling fires, seed sowing, grinding, etc. (Ross 1957:139).

However, Ross is uncertain whether these incantations were simply recited or whether they were actually sung (1957:139).

D.12 Occupational songs

In this category, Ross includes lullabies, milking songs, clapping songs, rowing songs, and spinning songs. Except for the rowing songs, they are all women's labour songs. The problem with the separation of "theme" from "occupational" songs is that some labour songs have topics that fit within the theme framework suggested by Ross, resulting in the exclusion of waulking songs as a separate category. Ross instead categorizes waulking songs by theme, since many waulking song lyrics are about relationships, matchmaking, pregnancy, and so on. Another problem is that songs are often used in several different contexts. For example, rowing songs have sometimes been used as lullabies and, in Cape Breton, a number of rowing and sailing songs have become part of the milling song repertoire. Furthermore, songs serve different functions in different contexts. As discussed in Chapter 6.4, *puirt-a-beul* once served to accompany dance but may also have been employed as women's labour songs.

(a) Lullabies

Lullabies are a problematic category in Ross's system although he argues that "most of the texts consist of endearments and references to the nursing or rearing of the child" (1957:143). However, lullaby lyrics refer to many different topics: "The trouble is that there are a lot of borderline cases ... and though a song may function as a lullaby, it may be classed as a lament, a fairy song, a eulogy or even a carol according to its subject-matter" (Bruford "Gaelic Lullabies" 1978:4). Moreover, many lullabies are associated with stories and refer to fairies, suggesting that "lullabies" as a category might be better

placed under “Fairy Songs.” In fact, almost all fairy-songs are lullabies (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5).

Because many lullabies refer to fairies either in their lyrics or in their accompanying stories, Ó Madagáin recently hypothesized that Gaelic lullabies are actually charms against fairies: “the obvious functions of the lullaby in all countries are, firstly, to lull the baby to sleep and, secondly, to express the mother’s love for her baby [but] ... I am suggesting that the Gaelic lullaby formerly had a supernatural function as well, namely as a charm to protect the baby from being abducted by the *Sí/Sithichean*” (1989:29).

Lullabies have their own set of restricted refrain vocables, different from those used in other Gaelic song genres, including waulking/milling songs and puirt-a-beul (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:4). Collinson identifies them as “conventional vocables of soothing and endearment, characteristic of the Gaelic language such as ‘*O bà, O bà*’ (cf. Lowland Scots ‘*Baloo*’), ‘*Mo leanabh*’ (my child), ‘*mo chèile*’ (my husband or wife, companion), ‘*Gille beag*’ (little boy), etc.” (1966:87). Breandán Ó Madagáin states that “it would seem quite likely that what is now the refrain of vocables represents the original lullaby, and that the singing of verses was a later development” (1989:33).

Some lullabies also function as laments: whereas the song is meant to soothe an infant, it may also lament the death of the infant’s father (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5). One well-known example is *Griogal Cridhe*. Rowing songs were also sometimes sung as lullabies since “a song for the swing of the oars would suit equally well the slow rocking of an infant in its mother’s arms” (Collinson 1966:89). Some lullabies foretell the future of an infant chief and are therefore “one way in which a

woman could get around the male monopoly on praise-poetry” (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:5).

(b) Milking Songs or Orain Bhleoghainn

It is believed that a cow produces more milk when soothed by music. According to Charles Dunn, “tradition claims that some rather pampered cows would not give milk” unless the milker sang the appropriate occupational songs (1991 [1953]:37). Scholars tend to agree that women responsible for the milking: “[milking songs] are in common use by the womenfolk of the crofts” (Collinson 1966:84). Milking song lyrics “may use vocables, the descriptive names of the cows, or prayers, but the commonest element is bare-faced flattery: ‘There is no cow in Ireland of greater beauty’” (Bruford “Gaelic Lullabies” 1978:6). Bruford, however, does not provide an example of milking song vocables, and does not discuss their similarity or dissimilarity from the vocables of other Gaelic song types. Ross asserts that “the majority of songs which can be shown to have ... this function are eulogies of favourite cows or heifers” and “milking songs are also exhortatory. The main element of the refrain may be a request for milk” (1957:143-144).

(c) Other occupational songs

In addition to lullabies and milking songs, Ross lists palming or clapping songs, rowing songs, and spinning songs as occupational songs. Palming or clapping songs (*òrain basaidh*) were sung during the folding stage of the waulking and were used to give the wool a nap or pile. These songs “are quick in tempo and light in mood, and often of

an improvisatory nature” (Collinson 1966:74). Collinson adds that, at one time, an *òran teannachaidh* (tightening song) was also sung while wringing out the cloth (1966:75).

Rowing songs are difficult to identify because their texts rarely refer to the task for which they were used. In addition, many became a part of the waulking tradition. A further complication results from the fact “that the word *iomair*—‘row,’ which would probably figure in exhortatory refrains, also means ‘drive’ or ‘push,’ and is used as an exhortation to strike the cloth in waulking songs” (Ross 1957:145). This makes it difficult to determine whether a song in the waulking tradition was originally a rowing song, or always a part of the waulking tradition. However, it is likely that rowing songs were once common, since Gaels depended upon the sea for their livelihoods and the regular rhythm of the songs would keep the rowers in time with each other (Collinson 1966:78).

Finally, spinning songs “are easily identifiable by textual allusions to the work of spinning” (Ross 1957:145) and most “are in a swinging six-eight rhythm to match the spin of the wheel and the beat of the treadle” (Collinson 1966:84). Ross does not discuss grinding, reaping, or butter churning songs, perhaps because he would categorize them according to theme or structure, rather than according to function.

D.13 Children’s Songs

An obvious absence in Ross’s classification of Gaelic songs is children’s songs. Even at the conclusion of his article, when he describes those songs that did not fit within his classification system, he does not mention children’s songs. Despite Ross’s oversight, it is worth taking note of them particularly since some consultants consider

puirt-a-beul to be children's songs (cf. Chapter 6.4.e). I found little information regarding songs sung to or by children (beyond lullabies). However, dandling songs were mentioned by several consultants (MacRitchie, James MacNeil) and are sung (by parents, relatives, neighbours, etc.) to toddlers and young children to amuse them rather than to soothe them, as with lullabies.² My consultants mentioned that children might be "dandled" on one's knee. According to Bruford, dandling songs are frequently nonsensical or comic, often referring to animals which display unusual behaviour, such as eels playing bagpipes (Bruford "Gaelic Lullabies" 1978:7), but my own consultants described dandling as similar to jigging, and improvisatory in nature.

Some Irish songs in this category closely resemble Scottish puirt-a-beul in structure and are also known as instrumental tunes. However, "the experts seem sure that the songs were never sung for dancing to, so they are not ... puirt-a-beul" (Bruford "Gaelic Lullabies" 1978:7). My consultants did not connect dandling with dancing; at most the association between the two consists in the fact that both involve precisely timed movement.

² Dandling songs offer an important means of communicating inter-generationally with infants who are pre-literate (Carpenter 1997:viii). They also offer men a means of connecting with their children emotionally in a socially acceptable manner.

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