



Seumas Mac Aonghuis 'ic Iain 'ic Uilleim 'ic Mhurchaidh

James MacKay was a life long resident of Kingsville, Inverness County, where he was born in 1913. "Jimmy" was a skilled clock repairman and collector of antiques. In addition, he managed the family farm along with his younger brother, a distinguished Gaelic style violin player, Alex Francis MacKay.

Jimmy was intimately familiar with his community. He would easily look past his own lifetime to his great-grandfather's era with a starting freshness. A reserved man by nature, Jimmy's thoughts were expressed in well chosen words. His recollections and opinions were in Gaelic terms and are lent a special poignancy by drawing on what is best in Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

I am James MacKay. My genealogy is James, the son of Angus, son of John, son of William, son of Murdock. Anna, daughter of Donald, was married to Murdock MacKay. I'm going to give you a little information about the state of Gaelic in these parts.

My ancestors came from Kintail in Scotland. It was called MacKay's Kintail to distinguish from another Kintail. They left the old country in 1790. I understand they left of their own free will. I didn't hear about any oppression. William, son of Murdock, was a ship's carpenter and also worked on furniture. I didn't hear why they chose Cape Breton as a dwelling. Perhaps they understood this was a very pleasant place. Anyway, this was the nearest land to them. I believe they were growing sick of the ocean.

They took up a farm in the rear of St. Peters in Richmond County. This place was called MacKay's Cove. My grandfather married a Glendale woman and he bought a farm here. That's the reason I live here. I have never resided anywhere else but here.

Since I was very young there have been great changes in the peoples' circumstances and their livelihood. In my grandfather's era it was a different situation everywhere. At that time the majority of people were taking their livelihood from the earth. This involved a good deal of work. They didn't have the implements that folk do today. The land had to be cultivated as Bard MacLean said, "... by the might of their arms." From the time the forest was felled with the axe to where a crop was brought to fruition there was an immense labour. For sure the neighbours were close to each other. They often shared in all work. They frequently held plowing and reaping frolics; they used the sickle and the sycythe. There was a bard around here called Allan, the son of Hugh (MacEachern). He was at a reaping frolic once and he made a verse of a song to taunt the others. It goes like this: "I was once reaping with a crew of nimble lads. I threw off my coat and outstripped them."

They had a thing called a cockfighting frolic. There used to be a get together in a house where folk would pitch roosters in contention with each other. They were fed for a while and their spurs sharpened. The

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fellow with the winning rooster was very boastful but the loser would be extremely sullen. If liquor was present it would often come to a row.

The women used to have spinning frolics and apparently there was a good deal of fun in this. There would be a wee dram among them and a goodly share taking snuff. Between that and strong tea it's likely suitable songs were to be heard in their midst.

Everyone had their own living to earn at special times of the year, but despite however busy they were, there would always be time to visit relations and friends at a long distance. The ceilidh was very fashionable. This was a custom that was good for perking folk up. There was always a new or humorous tale.

The people were very faithful to their belief then and when there wasn't a church nearby they would walk a distance to the service. They should get credit for that.

Despite the firmness of their faith the Gaels believed in spirits, ghosts, forerunners, charms and things of that nature. Doubtless there are such things as the evil-eye and envy.

I knew a graveyard in which they used to hear wailing. The graveyard was in kind of a remote place. People seldom heard this crying unless they ventured near it. There was a house where they were hearing a ghost. My uncle went to visit this house one night. It seems the people of the house didn't care because they were accustomed to it. After a while they heard a noise and stomping in the loft. The man of the house said, "The man upstairs is getting ready to go to bed."

There was always superstition and likely always will be. They were against anyone looking back when he left on a trip. They also considered it unlucky if you saw a bareheaded woman when you were travelling. It was even worse if she was red-headed. They didn't like to see the new moon through glass. That meant there would be an obstruction between you and your affairs for the duration of that moon. They claimed it wasn't good for an organ to be played at a wedding. I heard a proverb that stated: "The wedding made on Wednesday will leave no offspring in its wake." It was always customary to be married on Tuesday but now any day will do.

Since doctors were somewhat scarce the first while they needed a while to make home remedies. They used to boil a spruce herb found in pastures, and juniper tips, and drink it. There was an herb called 'Cuach Phàdraig' (plantago major). It's called plantain in English. This was useful to apply to any cuts or wounds. There was another herb they called 'Flíodh' (stellaria media). They used to boil it for soup. Its English name is chickweed.

It seems there was some among the first settlers who could play the fiddle. No doubt some of them had fiddles coming to this country; certainly some of these were excellent. Many people wished to learn to play the fiddle although they didn't have the opportunity. There were many who could play a little that were never heard in public. Some of the churches discouraged fiddle music on the Sabbath. My grandfather was a fiddler and he didn't see any harm at all in playing on Sunday. One Sabbath day he was playing and he noticed a neighbor in the doorway. Grandfather was very sure he had heard him and he didn't have time to put the fiddle away. He made an excuse he was playing a psalm.

Long ago all children were born at home since there weren't any doctors or hospitals near to hand. Midwives and wet nurses were often available in the neighborhoods. These charitable women didn't expect any reward but often their names were given to a child if it were a girl.

In these far off days folk didn't keep company before marriage as they do today. Very often a man would marry a woman from the neighborhood. Some times a woman was brought from away. In a case like that she would be very unacquainted. It was the fashion to seek a woman without having any knowledge to her.

If a man would have a suspicion as to where a woman suitable for him might be he would go accompanied by two others to make an arrangement. You think how difficult it was for a young woman to decide in a hurry. The matter would be decided by her mother.

I heard a story about a fellow like this. Two were with him to speak on his behalf. It was nighttime and the bachelor stayed outside. He waited for a spell and after a while the lads came with bad news, that she wouldn't have him. When he recovered his speech he said, "Upon my word she was only a bitch anyway!"

When a couple would marry there used to be a betrothal party. This was in the young woman's house. The wedding celebration was held in the groom's house. No doubt this was a spirited occasion with "sweet drink that we wouldn't refuse," and succulent food dressed and prepared at the house.

It was fashionable one time for the young bride to tie a ribbon to the head of the fiddler's violin while he played the "Married Couples Reel." That would be a four handed reel. The eight hand reel was very fashionable too. I heard a story about a fellow who was a little anxious to get in the eight hand reels although he didn't dance well to the music. Anytime he would go into the reel the fiddler would play a tune called "Donald Chasing the Goats." This man's name was Donald.

People most often died at home. Some attained a great age although many of the young died with diseases like small pox, diphtheria and consumption. These diseases used to go around now and then.

Everyone was waked at home with some of the folk watching all night. When someone died at the height of winter his burial was a great chore. There was once a man in these parts who lived far from the road and he died during a snow storm. There wasn't anyone in the home but himself and one old sister and no track at all going to the house. The man was dead a week before anyone came around.

There was no such thing as store bought coffins at all. There were always carpenters in the neighborhood that built coffins. Often times boards were specially kept for a situation like this.

They claimed the last person that was buried would guard the graveyard until the next burial. It was customary to bury the dead facing the east and the clergy facing the west. They believed in guarding the graveyard like that.

There was a variety of trades among the old people. Some of them came across the sea with their tools in tow. The young ones learned from them. Some of the trades people like tailors, cobblers and such were peripatetic. These people earned their living among the houses. They would very often be well received. They always used to have stories on account of travelling throughout the countryside. They used to abide a while in each house and folk would take their work to them. There was a young woman who was going to get married and she needed a pair of shoes. She went to a cobbler for a pair of shoes to be made. She explained how she wanted them; "Strong, strong at the back and the rest soft; and see that you come to the wedding."

Coopers were to be found here and there. This was a very useful trade as butter tubs had to be made, churns and milk pails. Every one of these would be put to use, especially at milking time.

Before saw mills were erected there was a thing called a sawing pole. They had long saw blades and a handle at each end. The stick that was to be sawn was set with an end up and an end down and they sawed it through. I understand this was laborious work. But in time water mills were built and the pole saws set aside.

When oats or wheat used to be harvested it was left in sheaves standing outside, drying in the sun. They were cut with sickles. If some of it was to be threshed for planting seed, it would have to be very dry. They used to thresh it when it was frozen so it would scatter better.

Of all the tradesmen, in my opinion, the blacksmith was most necessary, especially in the winter time. Horses had to be shod and they required sharp pointed shoes. Axes had to be hammered out, especially before saws came to fashion. Folk who used to work with oxen... some of them needed to be shod and the oxen chains had to be repaired. The proverb says: "The herdsman will bear the blacksmith's fatigue." My father was a blacksmith and he said he was never tired in the evening.

The food they customarily ate then was wholesome and healthy. Look at the food they eat today! Oats, barley and wheat were raised. They used to grind it with a quern when they wanted it. I understand oat bread with fresh butter on it was very tasty. All food and bread used to be cooked in iron containers in the fireplace. Very often they had either oat porridge or mashed potatoes for their supper.

For pastime there used to be someone who could play the Jew's harp or the fiddle or maybe someone that would sing a song. Within my own memory there was a fellow in the neighborhood that was good at songs, mouth tunes and tales. He was often here and us listening to him. This was Stephen O'Handley.

There was a man near my grandfather's place that used to play the Jew's harp. He had a little bothy at the edge of the woods and he was married. This might the man of the house was playing and his wife turned to him and said, "Oh little hero won't you play, 'The Bird's Nest in the Forest'?"

There were only two ways to travel. At first there wasn't a road. There was only a path through the forest. That would do for a man walking or on horseback between villages. In time oxen or horses hitched to a cart came in. The first roads were made by horses and plows. In the springtime especially, it would be a mud wallow. Fortunately people didn't travel much. Anyway horse and saddle were customary.

I heard them saying there used to be sailing vessels coming into the Strait of Canso. Some of them used to sail to the United States and anyone that had a reason to go to Pictou or Boston would hire to go on board in Port Hawkesbury. You didn't need English or a sailing ticket. They wouldn't make much money over and above their passage.

When motor cars came along there was a change. Travelling wasn't very smooth with mud and potholes in the road. The horses were frightened of the cars.

There was a racing field in the parish once. There used to be a field and fast horses there. There wasn't any prize offered but running the horses for entertainment. This affair wasn't kept up when folk wore out its novelty.

Despite how Gaelic went out in my generation it still lives in the hearts of the old people. It greatly saddens me to see that most of the young people have no interest in Gaelic. It's as though they're afraid they wouldn't be in style, but if they only knew how precious that language is, and sweet to speak. It is delightful for telling stories or singing songs. It would be a calamity if it went out of fashion totally, but we hope it won't die completely, on account of groups of people here and there working on its behalf. Those that are going to the effort to keep it alive and maintain it should be praised. But as the proverb said: "The tide and wind are against them." But anyway, I hope they have success.

But those of us who learned it young, there is no concern we will lose it since there are still a number of people around speaking it. Those who live alone without the opportunity to converse with folk who have it....it seems they will ruminate and think in Gaelic. It is true Gaelic can't be lost all together. I proved this once when I was talking to a man who spent fifty years in the United States, although he didn't see anyone

in that time that could speak it. It's true enough that we won't make a living on Gaelic but I would find myself somewhat incomplete without it.

When I went to school at first I didn't have a word of English and that was a handicap for me. From what I heard of composed speech, anecdotes and songs all my life, I think I would be somewhat desolate without the language. I learned the little English I have in school. I was awkward at learning it and that resulted in my not speaking it fluently.

I don't know any one special reason I could blame for the decline of Gaelic. Some people thought if the children had a little English before going to school, it would be an assistance to them. And the same ones only had a few words of poor English. That resulted in them only having half and half. Between people traveling and mingling, it seems English got the upper hand.

There was a time when we used to sell and buy in Gaelic. The merchants spoke that language, but that died.

At one time there were local bards around here. There were the 'Children of Hugh', in my grandfather's generation. They were Allan and Hugh and their sister, Clementine. Some of the MacVarishes were poets too. Jane MacInnis was the most famous woman bard among us. The MacLeans were exceptional bards. There was Alexander, the son of Fair Hugh, who they called Alexander of the Beak, who was a faultless bard. There was his son, Donald Lezzie, renowned in his day. Sam MacLean could make songs himself. They called his Sam Lezzie.

It sorrows me thinking of the famous people who have passed on. They didn't have schooling or instruction because they didn't get the opportunity. At the same time they had a keenness of intellect. It's good people are trying to maintain their renown. Too many depended on memory and when those who had the songs went, they died together. It's good there's someone who has a share of them.

In conclusion, I would like to say although the Gaelic is going by degrees there is hope that in time it will be restored. If our politicians would make up their minds to support us and see Gaelic in the schools or a Gaelic school kept here and there, in time maybe more people would take an attachment to the language. So far there's been nothing but a wisp of straw for the sake of effect. Although there is a difference in the Gaelic they speak in corners of this island, that's no hurdle at all. Once there was a clergyman here who was exceptionally good in Gaelic, although as he said himself, a "... grandson of a Frenchman, grandson of an Irishman." And at the same time he was considered the best English scholar east of Montreal. So it is that learned people are fond of acquiring Gaelic and maintaining its usage. As John Y. MacLellan said to me when I met him; -he asked me did I have Gaelic - he said, "Trifling its burden on the tip of the tongue." Despite the domination of English speakers thus far, perhaps Gaelic will advance. As John Roy Stewart said, "The wheel will come round a turn from South or North and our enemies will receive the reward of their injustice."

So we can only listen to hear how things are going, and I hope things change in favor of Gaelic.

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