

STÒRAS A' BHAILE



***DIGITAL ARCHIVES AND COMMUNITY-BASED LANGUAGE/CULTURE
RENEWAL***

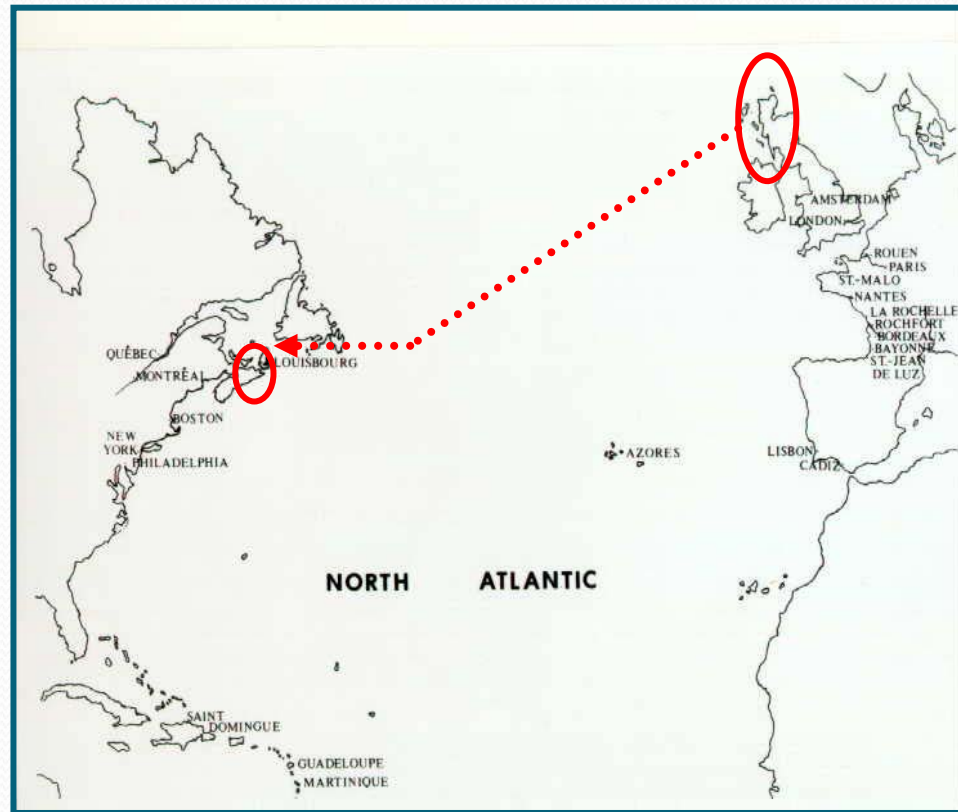
IN THE CAPE BRETON GAELIC REGIONS


**Presented by Dr John Shaw & Tiber Falzett, Celtic & Scottish Studies, U of
Edinburgh**

World Oral Literature Project Workshop, U of Cambridge, 10 December

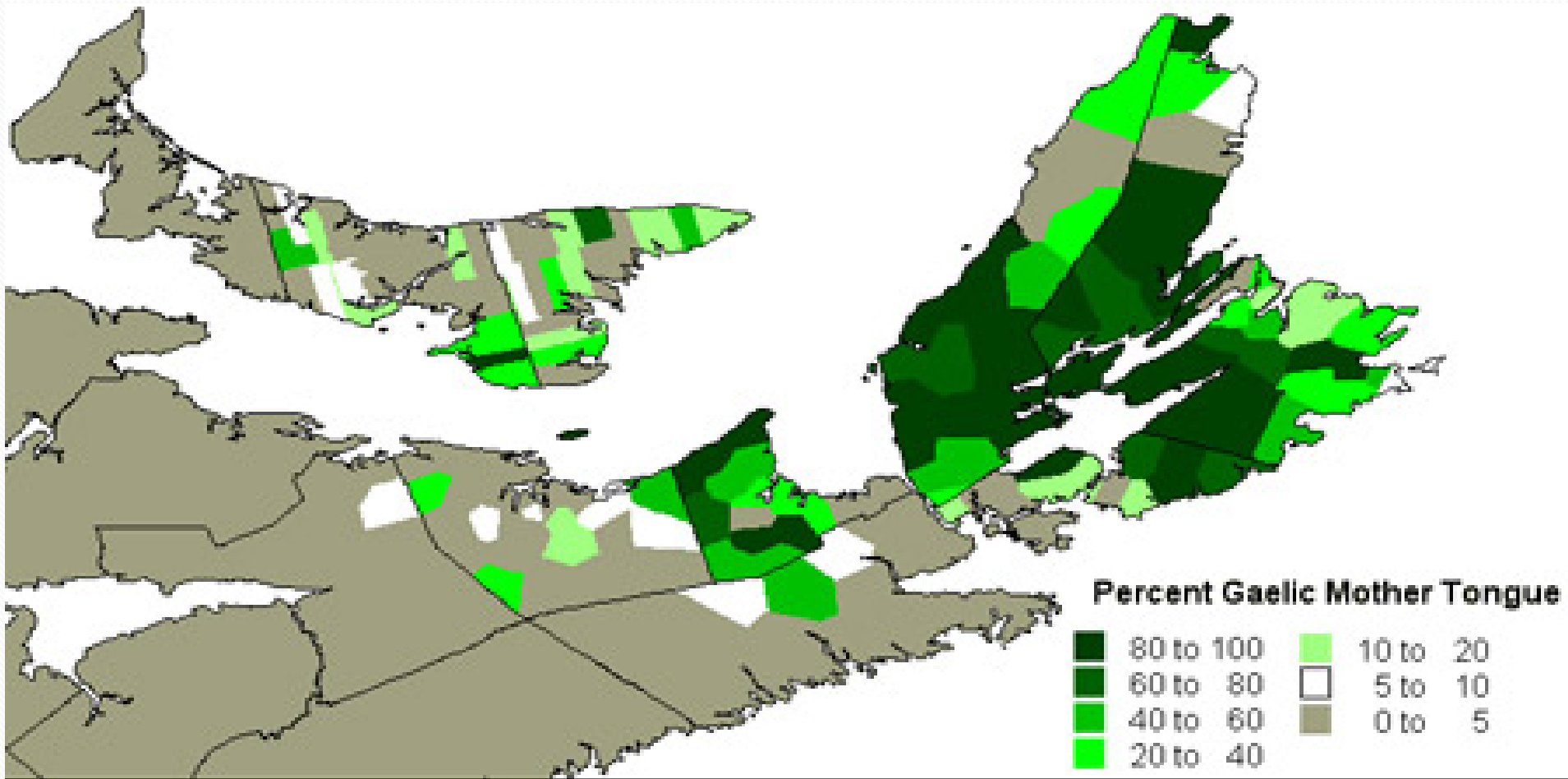
History and Orientation

- Emigration from Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland from 1770s onwards;
- Mostly Scottish Gaelic monoglots;
- Strong oral/aural traditions and social culture unsurpassed in western Europe;
- By 1850 upwards of 20,000 Scottish Gaelic speakers had settled in Cape Breton Island;
- Maximum Gaelic population circa 30,00 in late 19th



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- By 1900, 80-100% of many districts in Cape Breton Island were Gaelic-speaking, this declined throughout the twentieth-century;
 - Today, less than 100 fluent first-language speakers but around 1,350 learners according to Nova Scotia's Office of Gaelic Affairs;
 - Formal Institutions, the Church and the Government;
 - Community Institutions, *An Taigh Cèilidh*.

First-language Scottish Gaelic Speakers, 1901 National Census of Canada:



Jonathan Dembling, "Gaelic in Canada: new evidence from an old census." *Cànan & Cultar / Language & Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 3, Dunedin Academic Press, 2006.

Sound Archive

- *Gaelic Folklore Project* (1977-82), sponsored by Multicultural Directorate of Canada, focus on Cape Breton Island;
- 2 paid Gaelic tradition bearers, in addition to 100s of further contributors to field recording;
- The size: 1,962 sound recordings, videos + 18 donated private sound collections;
- *Sruth nan Gàidheal/Gael Stream*: Digital Archive of Material launched in 2006
www.gaelstream.ca;
<http://library.stfx.ca/search/>
- From the outset intended as a source for community language and culture renewal. The only question was How?



Joe Neil MacNeil (*Eòs Nìll Bhig*), one of the two paid tradition bearers.
Photo by Tom Ptacek.

Challenges: 1970s – 90s

- Relative regional poverty (“Canada’s economic basket-case”), high unemployment, export of youth, social problems arising from eroded self-esteem;
- Exceptionally rich regional culture even by Old World Gaelic standards;
- No effective links established between tax-supported institutions and community culture. Gaels confronted with unresponsive post-Gaelic ‘managerial class’: education, media, ‘Gaelic’ and ‘Highland’ organisations;
- Limitations of technology for this tradition due to its fundamental social nature. Workshops over the summer and other gatherings are essential because nothing can replace direct social interaction.

Shifting Paradigms on Documenting 'Heritage'

- Watershed moment, in which a paradigm shift from tangible to intangible culture occurred.
- NSHVM, the Provincial Museums of Nova Scotia shifted focus from historical objects and architecture to people and living culture;
- YEAR from Jim Watson



Nova Scotia Highland Village Museum

The Gaelic Archives as a Source of Creativity: Mary Jane Lamond



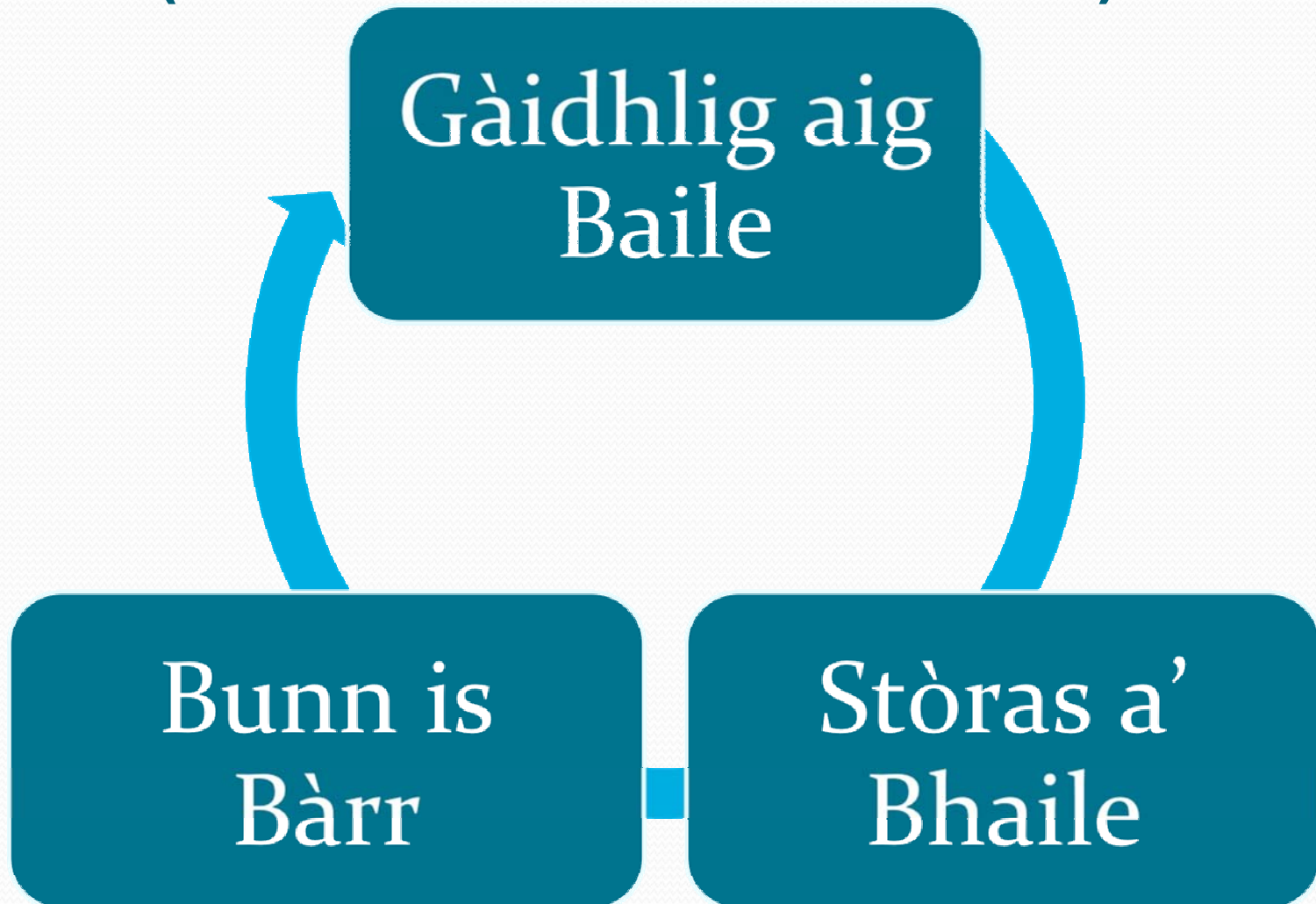
- Her work in the St.F.X.U's Gaelic Archives digitising tapes;
- Using traditional material from archives in performance, popularising Gaelic tradition in North America;
- Ashley MacIsaac's track, "Sleepy Maggie," which included Scottish Gaelic vocals from Mary Jane Lamond, topped the North American charts, hitting 13 in the national Canadian record charts and 29 in the US Dance charts in 1995.



**“Mo Ghille Mór Foghain'each”
chanted by Joe Neil MacNeil on
track.**

“TRÌ CHEARCALLAN CEANGAILTE/3 BOUND CIRCLES”

(From James Watson 2010)



GÀIDHLIG AIG BAILE

- *Gàidhlig aig Baile/Gaelic at Home* (2005): Provincially funded language renewal initiative;
- Language ‘nest’ immersion, communal acquisition of local linguistic knowledge occurs through oral/aural methods in a comfortable social environment;
- Accomplished largely through group activities;
- Has resulted in a huge leap in language confidence and competency in the past 5



Theresa Burke making
Bonnach. Photo by Tiber Falzett

Cainnt Mo Mhàthar (My Mother Tongue)

- *Cainnt Mo Mhàthar/My Mother Tongue* (2005);
- *Mar bu Nòs bho Shean/In the Traditional Way* (2007);
- **Online Archive** (2008);
www.cainntmomhathar.com;
- Such projects create welcome social occasions for senior members of the local community.



Theresa Burke (*Treasag ni'n Pheadair Mhòir*) and her daughter Marion Burke at NSHVM. Photo by Tiber Falzett.

“Am Muileann Dubh” Told by Willie Fraser (Uillidh Shimon) from Mar bu Nòs bho Shean



Alex Francis MacKay (*Ailig mac Aonghais 'ic Iain*) & Willie Fraser
Glenville (*An Gleann Dubh*), Cape Breton, Canada, 14 August 2007.

Stòras and Bun is Bàrr

- *Stòras nan Gàidheal/The Treasure of the Gaels* (2007);
- *Stòras a' Bhaile/Our Wealth at Home* (2008): Gaelic Folklife Workshop, summer programme at Nova Scotia Highland Village Museum;
- *Bun is Bàrr/Root and Branch* (2009): Gaelic Mentorship programme for learners.



Cèilidh at Stòras a' Bhaile 2009. Photo by Tiber Falzett.

Stòras a'Bhaile/Our Wealth at Home, learners and first-language speakers interact:



Courtesy of Communications Nova Scotia/Shirley Robb

Transmission
by Social
Interaction

COMMUN
AL

Mentorship

Fieldwork
Projects

ARCHIVES

THE HIGHLAND VILLAGE MODEL

SOCIAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- Gàidhlig aig Baile
- Stòras a' Bhaile
- An Drochaid Eadarainn

FIELDWORK

- Cainnt Mo Mhàthar
- Mar bu Nòs bho Shean

MENTORSHIP

- Bun is Bàrr



Digital Archives in the Lives of Learners

- “It can break my heart if I let it or I can focus on what is still alive, in combination with what has been preserved, or recorded. [...] The recordings found on *Gael Stream* [...] include recordings from my own relatives and those of other families from the area.
- I feel that these recordings fill in the gaps and I listen to them almost daily. [...] The fact that we have easy and free access to this work gives me the hope I need to continue learning Gaelic and teaching it to my young daughter.”—
Amber Buchanan, The North Shore, Cape Breton

Making Connections

- “As a learner, I often download one clip at a time and practice listening over and over again.
- They make connections to people they know, and most times they didn’t even know that the person spoke Gaelic!”—
Meaghan O’Handley

An Drochaid Eadarainn

- Proposed interactive website which combines online archives with social context and networks;
- Incorporates social orientation of *Stòras a' Bhaile, Bun is Bàrr*;
- Online *cèilidh* house, with traditional benefits of social setting;
- Providing a forum that will facilitate transmission and practice of communal language and culture among likeminded people throughout the Province of Nova Scotia and beyond.

Review and Points for the Future

- Theory of above initiatives is grounded in fieldwork:
 - ✓ ‘Without the context the text is nothing,’ (Bronislaw Malinowski 1926);
 - ✓ John Myles Foley: ‘Oral [Poetry] Works Like Language Only More So’; We need verbal and social contexts; power of shared cultural associations;
 - ✓ Traditional social contexts and techniques of transmission are helpful if not essential to maintaining community traditions;
- Archives, once made easily available, can restore to a culture items or whole areas that are no longer in active use;
- Information technology is a means of democratising dialogues about local culture and promoting creative interaction within communities;
- The issues around control and self determination of local culture are most effectively dealt with on a local level;
- The internet is a means for communities to work outside of uninformed or unresponsive bureaucracy and take back their culture;

In Cape Breton Gaelic Communities

- The importance in this Gaelic region of a social orientation;
- Technology as a tool for Gaelic communities in dealing with geographical isolation and local institutions;
- Regional culture as documented through fieldwork, rather than imported pseudo-culture or manufactured state culture;
- Programmes are intended for people to participate in the process, claim it as their own, and experience a sense of discovery, renewed belonging and pride.

Future Applications

- The model consisting of community participation + archives + readily available information technology is a flexible one and can be applied to a wide range of living cultures.

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• Community Participation

2

• Archives

3

• Information Technology

Thanks

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- Sincere thanks to Amber Buchanan and Meaghan O'Handley for their narratives.
- Put Mary Jane 20-30 Seconds fading, lullaby from Jim MacKinnon, O Dhùthaich nan Craobh;
- Jim Watson Article citation,