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The Macs meet the ‘Micmacs’: Scottish Gaelic First Encounter Narratives from Nova Scotia

Michael Newton

By the thirteenth century anglophones in Scotland were projecting negative characteristics such as bellicosity, sloth, thievery, and savagery upon the Gaelic-speaking aboriginals of Scotland, type-casting them into the role of ‘Other’. Polarisation between the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and the English/‘Scots’-speaking Lowlands continued during the medieval period, with Gaels being increasingly marginalised and disenfranchised by the formal institutions of the nation state geographically, politically, economically, culturally, and linguistically. By the time of the Union of the Crowns in 1603, when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England, schemes for creating plantations in the Gàidhealtachd to contain, assimilate or expel the native inhabitants had been proposed and, in several cases, attempted. Contemporary evidence indicates that the stereotypes held by anglophones about the peoples encountered during efforts to colonise Gaeldom in Scotland and Ireland and the ‘New World’ influenced one another.¹ During the eighteenth century many Highlanders were either dispossessed of their land outright or so severely disadvantaged that emigration to North America became the only option for survival. These experiences gave them a basis for empathising with other victims of colonisation such as Indigenous Americans,² even if they did not

¹ Michael Newton, *We’re Indians Sure Enough: The Legacy of the Scottish Highlanders in the United States* (Richmond, 2001), 216–43; Colin Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal Peoples and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America* (Oxford, 2008), 1–2, 10–15, 17–42; Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders* (Edinburgh, 2009), 18–22, 28–35, 59–71.

² There is considerable disagreement and debate about which ethnonym is most appropriate to designate the peoples indigenous to the Americas not only in the political apparatus of modern nation-states of Canada and the United States, but in and between local communities themselves. I have chosen, for the purposes of this paper, to use ‘Indigenous Americans’ to refer to these people (despite my reservation that indigeneity is a dimension of culture not specific to any continent or ethnic group); ‘Indian(s)’ as a translation of the Gaelic term *Innseana(i)ob* (itself a Gaelic adaptation of the English ‘Indian(s)’); ‘Mi’kmaq’ when referring collectively to the indigenous people of Nova Scotia (who consider ‘Micmac’ as an obsolete ethnonym with colonial overtones); ‘Mi’kmaw’ as the adjective associated with them and their culture, or a single member of the nation.

always choose an empathetic response in their encounters.

Small numbers of Scottish Gaels came from the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland to North America in the seventeenth century, but the migration of nuclear families, extended families, and communities did not begin until the 1730s when settlements were established in New York, Georgia and North Carolina. As socio-economic conditions deteriorated in the Highlands, increasing numbers of Gaels relocated to North America under a variety of unfavourable circumstances, showing a marked preference for migrating as kin-groups into the mid-nineteenth century. Of all of the Gaelic settlements in North America, immigrant communities in Nova Scotia have remained the most resilient culturally and linguistically, and thus provide the best surviving evidence about their early experiences. Small groups of Scottish Gaels began to explore Nova Scotia in the 1770s, with the bulk of migrants settling the mainland of Nova Scotia from the 1790s onwards and Cape Breton in the early nineteenth century.

Neither Indigenous Americans nor Scottish Gaels were single, homogenous groups about whom it is safe to make facile generalisations: these groups were comprised of individuals who had been conditioned by specific experiences and who had particular agendas of their own. Scottish Highland immigrants encompassed a range of roles and backgrounds: soldiers employed to execute the orders of the British Empire; disbanded soldiers settling on land-grants given as reward for military service; fur traders working on behalf of a multinational corporation such as the Hudson's Bay Company; emigrants spurred by economic hardship and religious intolerance; and dispossessed peasants expelled to North America. These varying circumstances embedded them in particular power relations and ideological paradigms that had significant impacts on their perceptions, choices, actions, and reactions when they encountered Indigenous Americans in specific places and contexts.

Indigenous Americans had reason to be suspicious and hostile towards Europeans swarming into their territories and no particular reason to distinguish Highlanders from other Europeans. Gaels were seldom the first colonists in most of the places they settled. Gaelic communities formed in Nova Scotia well after the dominance of anglophone institutions and the devastation of Mi'kmaw communities: by the end of the Seven Years' War the Indigenous population in Nova Scotia had been reduced to a tiny remnant whose land rights had been made forfeit. Mi'kmaq wishing to have their land legally recognised had to compete with other applicants, but in practice the government was ineffective in allocating plots and not able or willing

to reinforce their rights as increasing numbers of immigrants squatted on them.³ Violent clashes must have happened, if only in self-defense. Indeed, as demonstrated below, many Gaelic narratives reflect an awareness of this encroachment.

Once we start to pose questions about Gaelic perceptions of Indigenous Americans, especially amongst the non-élite, it is crucial to answer them by reference to texts composed in the language that the vast majority of non-élite Highlanders spoke at this time: Scottish Gaelic. The range of texts now available for analysis is limited by the fact that few Gaels were literate in their own language and most Gaelic-speaking communities in Canada lost their language and oral traditions before they could be recorded accurately by folklorists or historians. This makes those that do survive from Nova Scotia very valuable relics indeed.

Gaelic oral narratives recorded from the Nova Scotian community about their relations with Indigenous Americans, from first encounters through to later settlement, do not reflect the essentialist notions of racialism (inherent superiority rooted in biology) or even the presumptions of linear social evolution dominant in imperial discourse. They instead depict a meeting of kindred peoples who resolved competing interests on commonly understood terms, even if these resolutions involved contests of strength and brawn. At the same time, the tales reveal a sense of guilt about occupying territories once inhabited by Indigenous Americans.

I Literary and Cultural Encounters

The perceptions and significance of encounters between peoples are shaped and influenced by a number of factors, not least the categories transmitted by narratives and imposed by the imagination. As historians have long noted, Europeans had a range of contradictory myths about 'the New World' which conditioned their responses to Indigenous Americans, seeing them variously as innocents in paradise or violent, pagan barbarians in a forbidding wilderness:

Europeans encountered savages in America because their minds and their senses had been molded by a powerful mythic formula that

³ Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Oxford, 2002), 136–7, 206–8; Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders*, 210–12.

equated societies less elaborately organised than their own with the primal condition. This myth enabled Europeans to make sense out of America, to reach an accommodation between the new continent and a venerable abstraction basic to European beliefs. Unfortunately, the American native as savage bore little resemblance to the real Indian. As a consequence Europeans went to the New World ill-equipped to understand or deal with the societies they met there. Tension arose immediately between what Europeans thought they saw and what actually existed, but no means were available to reconcile anthropology with myth. Once classified as savage, the Indian could be expected to play out his role in relation to the civil order.⁴

It is certainly no accident that Indigenous Americans were commonly portrayed as 'savage' as this image played a central role in imperial ideologies of conquest.⁵ While having also been depicted as 'savage' by anglophones, Gaels themselves were not immune to these ideologies, as they themselves were both colonised and acted as colonisers during the expansion of the British Empire.⁶

Although in many cases Gaels were able to draw from their own cultural background to create imaginative bridges that spanned the chasm to the culture of Indigenous Americans, the potential for suspicion, fear, and hostility equally existed as well. Indeed, it seems that frightening tales depicting Indigenous Americans as brutal and forbidding savages were already in circulation in Scotland before many emigrants left. Military officers who had fought them in the Seven Years' War (1756–63) no doubt brought tales of their fierce enemies back to Scotland, although imaginative literature in English may have well played a part as well in such perceptions. An anecdote recorded in 1910 (almost certainly based on Gaelic oral traditions) about Eòghan Camshron, a native of Lochaber who migrated in 1801 to Pictou, states:

If there was anything more than others that Scottish immigrants dreaded, in coming to this country, it was the Indians or red-skins of America. From exaggerated reports of them received at home, the very name suggested scalping, bloodthirstiness, and all conceivable forms of

⁴ Bernard Sheehan, *Savagism & Civility* (Cambridge, 1980), 3.

⁵ Thomas Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York, 1997).

⁶ Michael Newton, 'Celtic Cousins or White Settlers? Scottish Highlanders and First Nations', forthcoming.

cruelties and atrocities. They regarded them as scarcely human, much less Christians.⁷

That such apprehension may have existed in Gaelic form is also suggested in oral narratives recorded later, as discussed below.

Not all depictions of Indigenous peoples anticipated antagonism and conflict: Robert MacDougall's 1841 *Ceann-iùil an fhir-imrich do dh'America mu-thuath* (*The Emigrant's Guide to North America*), on the contrary, attempted to allay the fears of potential emigrants by relating the landscape, peoples, and languages to what they already knew in the Highlands, especially their own native language. He provides Gaelic etymologies for place names, personal names, and ordinary words in Indigenous American languages. Given the central role of identity in culture, this implies a notion of kinship. In fact, he draws a wide range of parallels between Highlanders and Indigenous Americans, including their postures, clothing, and social structures.⁸

The kennings and nicknames coined by Gaelic speakers provide significant clues in themselves about perceptions. North America was commonly referred to as *Dùthaich nan Craobh* (The Land of the Trees) and Indigenous Americans by the nickname *Coilltich* (People of the Forests).⁹ The close association between Indigenous Americans and the forests is strongly evident in Gaelic narratives and analysis of the implications will be further developed below.

It is also important to note the possibility that elements of Gaelic narratives of the 'supernatural' may have influenced the perceptions of Indigenous Americans. In the late nineteenth century Rev. Ronald MacGillivray of Antigonish County likened the increasingly scarce natives with the fairies of Gaelic tradition, mentioning the contemporary theory that stories about the fairies emerged to explain the fading remnants of the Druids.¹⁰ Like many other immigrants, the Scottish Gaelic community in the Codroy Valley of Newfoundland was wary of the preternatural abilities attributed to Indigenous Americans. One folklore item in particular resonates with older Highland tradition: 'If you were in the woods ... when they'd be deer hunting or hunting wild game like that, well they could witch your gun so that your gun could fire

⁷ Quoted in *Casket*, 23 October 1913; reprinted in D. MacFarlane and R. A. MacLean (eds), *Drummer on Foot* (Antigonish, n.d.), 47.

⁸ Robert MacDougall, *Ceann-iùil an fhir-imrich do dh'America mu-thuath* (Glasgow, 1841), 34–46.

⁹ Newton, *We're Indians Sure Enough*, 121, 172–3, 177; idem, 'Celtic Cousins or White Settlers?.'

¹⁰ Raymond MacLean (ed.), *History of Antigonish* (Antigonish, 1976), 14.

but you wouldn't kill nothing."¹¹ On the one hand, this anecdote suggests an awareness of competition between Indigenous and incoming communities for animal resources; on the other hand, it may also reflect ancient Gaelic narratives about territorial goddesses who are equated with wild nature and protect non-domesticated animals, especially the deer.¹²

II First Encounter Tales

As an exhaustive list will not be possible until much more work is done to collect and index Gaelic sources, I must simply highlight a few of the oral narratives that I have located, recorded from the 1920s to the 1960s.¹³ These are given below in the order in which they were committed to writing, with some notes on the motifs that appear in these tales. Most of these texts are difficult to find so I include the original Gaelic text in this paper as well as my own translations.

A. MacNeils Come to Christmas Island

Archibald MacKenzie's 1926 *History of Christmas Island Parish* is an early exemplar of how Gaelic oral traditions can be used to illustrate the history of a local community, particularly at the non-élite level.¹⁴ Although most of the traditions recorded in the book were translated into English, many phrases remain in Gaelic and a sizable appendix of Gaelic songs is included. The sketch of one emigrant includes an account of a first encounter between Gaels and Mi'kmaq in Malagawatch, Inverness County (on the west shore of Bras d'Or Lake).

This Rory McNeil was a foster-brother of one of the chiefs of Barra. Judging from the stories related about him he must have been a very powerful man. Four of his sons and one daughter came from the Gulf

¹¹ Margaret Bennett, *The Last Stronghold: The Scottish Gaelic Traditions of Newfoundland* (Edinburgh, 1989), 128.

¹² Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 227–31, 323–5.

¹³ The caveat must also be explicitly made that this article only explores oral traditions as they have been transmitted and recorded by Gaelic speakers. The work of comparing how they correspond to the historical record of contemporary events must be left for future research.

¹⁴ There is an interesting account about Archibald MacKenzie in John L. Campbell (ed.), *Songs Remembered in Exile*, 2nd. ed. (Edinburgh, 1999), 25, 73.

and settled in Cape Breton; these were John, Donald, Neil, James and Mary. It appears that they were among the first immigrants that came from Barra to the Gulf. One of them, 'Big James', dissatisfied with conditions at the Gulf, set sails to his boat and came to Cape Breton. When months had passed and no tidings from him had reached his brothers, they became uneasy about him, and they feared that he had been killed by Indians. John, Donald and Neil came in a boat by the way of St Peter's to search for him along the shores of the Bras d'Or Lakes. When they reached Malagawatch they found an Indian village there; and when their boat touched the shore, a party of hostile Indians, headed by a big squaw carrying a long scalping knife, met them; and by their actions they gave the white men to understand that they (the Indians) would scalp them when they went on shore. The squaw was the most hostile of the lot, and she even went so far as to climb into the boat to attack the McNeils; but one of them caught her from behind and threw her into the sea. At this juncture another squaw came to the shore and began to remonstrate with the Indians over their hostile attitude towards the whites. The McNeils recognised this squaw as one who used to visit the houses of the settlers at the Gulf. She could speak some English; and they received the intelligence from her that the brother for whom they were seeking was living and working in a ship-yard at Baddeck. After this the Indians became more friendly, and they offered to exchange some eels 'gàdach' for some of the potatoes which the McNeils had in the boat—an offer which was gladly accepted.¹⁵

The unease about the fate of Big James and the initially hostile stance of the Mi'kmaq of Malagawatch might be seen as acknowledging the competing interests of natives and incomers, although these tensions are certainly used in the narrative to heighten the drama. The Mi'kmaq occupy the land while the Gaels approach by boat and do not come to land until a resolution to the conflict is negotiated. Women take the prominent leadership roles taken by males in Gaelic society. This observation may serve to highlight the alienness of the Indigenous American social order. The long scalping knife carried by the woman who first confronts the Gaels symbolises her power.

The potentially violent encounter is conciliated by another female leader, one with whom the Gaels had a previous relationship. She appears to be a

¹⁵ Archibald MacKenzie, *History of Christmas Island Parish* (n.p., 1926), 130.

cultural mediator: she speaks English, comes to the shore (a liminal space between ocean and land), and has previous experience inside the domain of non-Indigenous peoples. Friendly relations between the Indigenous Americans and the Gaels are cemented through the exchange of food items. In fact, food is at the centre of many socially integrative ceremonies and re-appears in this manner in other narratives.

On the whole, this particular narrative is a rather bare one, having a number of key motifs but lacking the elaborations and stylistic characteristics of Gaelic narratives in the tales discussed below. This is what we might expect, however, given that the author is writing in English for an outside audience.

B. 'The Knife of the Great Indian'

The periodical *Fear na Cèilidh* was printed in Sydney, Cape Breton,¹⁶ and featured articles, tales, and poetry in Gaelic. Calum (no surname given) contributed an anecdote entitled 'Sgian an Innseanaich Mhóir' ('The Knife of the Great Indian') which depicts an encounter near Framboise (Richmond County, south-east Cape Breton) in the year 1815.

Fada mu'n d'thàinig Gaidheal no Gall gu ruige Framboise, bha Iain Dubh Innseanach a' gabhail tàmh ann; agus, coltach ri Melchisedec, chan eil eachdraidh ag innse cia às a thàinig, no cuin a thàinig, no càit' an deachaidh an duine mór, còir sin; ach air aon nì tha fios: gun robh e fhéin is Màiri a bhean a' fuireach aig bun a' Chaoil Mhóir, am Framboise, roimh'n bhliadhna 1815.

Anns a' bhliadhna sin thàinig Eachunn Saor (MacFhionghain) agus Aonghus MacDhombnaill, le'n cuid theaghlachan, a-nall thar fairge às na h-Earadh, 's an t-soitheach d'am b' ainm "Hercules." B'e Sidni a' cheud phort a bhuail iad. Thàinig an dà theaghlach air tìr, agus stiùir iad an cùrsa air an taobh a deas de'n eilean. Dh'fhàgadh na mnathan 's a' chlann ann am Mira, agus an ceann thrì seachdainnean ràinig na fir cladaich Framboise gu h-àirtneulach, sgèith.

An uair a ràinig iad bun a' Chaoil Mhóir, shuidh iad sìos a leigeil an analach; agus air dhaibh a bhith sealltainn mu'n cuairt air àilleachd oibre nàdair, chunnaic iad nì a chuir mór-iongnadh orra—beagan astair bhuapa campa agus smùid ceò às. Choisich iad suas gu faiceallach dh'ionnsaigh a' champa agus an sin a chunnaic iad

¹⁶ Campbell, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, 55.

an t-Innseanach agus a bhean a' tighinn a-mach. Bha sgian mhór air a crochadh le éill mu chneas an Innseanaich, agus bha tuagh aig an sguà 'na aimh [sic?].

Cha robh fios glé mbath aig na fir gu dé b' fhearr dhaibh a dhèanamh. Thuir Eachunn ri Aonghus, "Tha am bàs air tighinn oirnn." Fhreagair Aonghus, "Mas e 's gur h-e 'm bàs a th' ann, creiceamaid ar beatha cho daor 's a dh'fhaodas sinn." Agus thilg e dheth a chòta. Ach is e bh'ann gun do dh'fhàiltich an t-Innseanach iad gu càirdeil, agus chuir e impidh orra a dhol a-steach do'n champa, a chum 's gun gabhadh iad biadh.

Ghabh iad gu toileach ris an tairgse a fhuair iad, oir bha iad fann sgèth agus acrach. Ach gu dé chaidh a chur mu'n coinneamh air pìos beilleig ach caob de mhusgais a chaidh a bhrùich air son na dìnnearach. Cha robh mór chabhaig air na fir gu tòiseachadh ri ithe o chionn nach robh fàile làidir na musgais' a' tighinn ri'n càil. Nuair a chunnaic Iain Dubh nach robh na coigrich a' tòiseachadh air ithe, ars esan, "Sposum you not like musquash—tryum duck." 's e aig an aon àm a' cur air am beulaibh pìos tunnaig a chaidh a bhrùich còmhla ris a' mhusgais.

Bha an t-acras mór orra co-dhiùbb, agus dh'ith iad pàirt de'n tunnaig; ach bha iad ag innse an déidh sin gun robh blas na musgais air an t-sìthinn cho mór 's gun robh i a' bagairt tilleadh air ais orra. Dh'ith Iain Dubh 's a bhean an sàth de'n mhusgais, agus chuir e mór ionghnadh orra nach blaiseadh na coigrich a thàinig an rathad air fèisd cho blasda.

Thog Eachann Saor agus Aonghus dà thaigh bheag air aodann cnuic mu chairteal a' mhìle o bhun a' chaoil agus an ùine ghoirid thug iad an cuid theaghlachan a-nuas còmhla riutha. An uair a thuig an t-Innseanach mór gun robh a thuar air na coigrich an dachaigh a dhèanamh 'na nàbachd, cha robh e idir cho càirdeil 's a b' àbhaist dha bhith; cha robh e toilichte bhith 'faicinn thaighean 'gan togail timchioll air; agus aon fheasgar ciùin foghair, chunnacas Iain Dubh is Màiri a bhean a' fàgail a' champa, eallach air druim gach aon diubh, agus chan fhacas an dubh no an dath riamh an déidh an fheasgair sin.

An ceann latha no dhà, chaidh na fir sìos a choimhead do'n champa, ach bha gach nì air a thrusadh air falbh. A-measg nan sliseag, fhuair Eachunn sgian mbath a bha mu chòig òirlich dheug a dh'fhaid', agus cas de dh'adharc fèidh innte. Tha an sgian sin ri faicinn fhathast ann an taigh ogba do dh'Eachann Saor agus tha i cho geur 's gun toireadh i an fheusag bharr duine. Thairg Geangach fichead dolair oirre

*bliadbna no dha air ais, ach cha dealaicheadh ogha Eachainn Shaoir rithe; cha reiceadh e sgian an Innseanaich Mhóir air òr no air airgead.*¹⁷

Long before Highlander or Lowlander ever came to Framboise, Black-haired John the Indian lived there; and, like Melchizedek, there is no history about where he came from, or when he came, or where that great and goodly man went. But one thing is certain: that he himself and his wife Mary were living at the base of Grand Narrows in Framboise before the year 1815.

In that year Eachann the carpenter (MacKinnon) and Aonghus MacDonald came with their families across the ocean from the island of Harris in the vessel which was named ‘Hercules’. Sydney was the first port where it landed. The two families came to shore and they set their course for the south end of the island. The women and children were left in Mira and after three weeks the men reached the shore of Framboise, tired and weary.

When they reached the base of the Grand Narrows, they sat themselves down to rest, and after they had been gazing upon the beauty of nature, they saw something that greatly amazed them — there was a camp a short distance from them from which smoke was rising. They walked carefully over towards the camp and there they saw the Indian and his wife coming out of doors. There was a great knife hanging from a thong around the waist of the Indian and his wife had an axe.

The men were quite uncertain as to what they should do. Eachann said to Aonghus, ‘We are going to die.’ Aonghus answered, ‘If we’re going to die, let’s put up a good fight,’ and he threw off his coat. What should happen instead but the Indian welcomed them in a friendly manner and urged them to come inside of the camp so that they might have some food.

They gladly accepted the invitation that they were offered because they were weak, tired, and hungry. But what was put in front of them on a piece of bark but a steak of muskrat that had been boiled for

¹⁷ *Fear na Cèilidh*, 2 (1929), 38–40.

dinner. The men were in no great hurry to eat it given that the strong smell of the muskrat did not agree with their tastes. When Black-haired John saw that the strangers were not beginning to eat, he said, 'Sposum you not like musquash—tryum duck,' setting a piece of duck before them which had been boiled with the muskrat at the same time.

They were extremely hungry anyway, and they ate some of the duck; but afterwards they said that the taste of the muskrat was so strong on the meat that it was threatening to come back up on them. Black-haired John and his wife ate their fill of the muskrat, and they were greatly surprised that the strangers who came their way would not take a taste of such a delicious feast.

Eachann the carpenter and Aonghus built two houses on the face of a hillock about a quarter of a mile from the base of the narrow, and after a short time they brought their families over with them. When the great Indian realised that the strangers appeared to be making their homes in his environment, he was no longer as friendly as he used to be; he was not at all pleased to be seeing homes being built close to him; and one peaceful autumn afternoon Black-haired John and his wife Mary were seen leaving the camp, a load of goods on the back of each one of them, and no sign of them has ever been seen since that afternoon.

After a day or two, the men went down to look at the camp, but everything had been taken away. Eachann found a good knife [that had been left] amongst the wood chips that was about fifteen inches long made with a deer antler handle. That knife can still be seen in the house of one of Eachann the carpenter's grandchildren, and it is so sharp that it can take off a man's beard. A Yankee offered twenty dollars for it a year or two ago, but Eachann's descendant would not part with it; he would not sell the knife of the great Indian for gold or for silver.

The narrator opens by acknowledging Indigenous Americans as the original possessors of the land. The names of the characters 'John' and 'Mary' give them a generic, archetypal quality, almost as though this encounter might be generalised to Indigenous Americans as a whole. The tale, however, is given

a specific place and time, which reinforces its veracity, as does the physical existence of the knife. The two Highland immigrants are given names and origins which also assert the historical reliability of the narrative. Their journey of three weeks, however, may be indicative of the traditional fondness for the number three rather than an historical fact.

The smoke the men see is a sign of fire and (as obvious as it may sound) fire is a symbol of human civilisation. The first depiction given of the Mi'kmaq is one in which they are fully empowered individuals, as symbolised by their weaponry: John wearing a big knife and Mary an axe. The immediate assumption of the Highlanders is that they will be subject to aggression. While this may be a projection of their fears and guilt over trespassing in alien territory, it is also a narrative strategy to build dramatic tension. They prepare to die in an honorable manner, as prescribed by the warrior ethos and reflected in many Gaelic heroic tales.¹⁸ Despite their apprehension, John and Mary welcome them over into their homestead and offer them food.

Feasting again appears as a socially integrative ritual, except that instead of creating a mutually symbiotic bond, the food itself does not cross social boundaries: muskrat, palatable to the Mi'kmaq, is revolting to the Highlanders.¹⁹ The Mi'kmaq are able to feed themselves and even extend their largesse to foreign guests; hospitality and generosity are arguably the highest of virtues in Gaelic culture,²⁰ as in many others. Despite this, there is a fundamental incompatibility between their civilisations that this event presages. John and Mary are confused by the inability of the Highlanders to ingest and appreciate their offerings while Eachann and Aonghus can barely contain the duck because it has merely come into contact with the muskrat.

When the Gaels erect homesteads and begin to impinge upon Mi'kmaw territory, John and Mary realise the implications and become less friendly. It would be more accurate to say that the narrator reflects the awareness of Gaels that the Mi'kmaq did not welcome Highland settlement in their land, that it had negative repercussions for Mi'kmaw civilisation, and that there were fundamental and irreconcilable differences between cultures as represented by

¹⁸ John MacInnes, *Dùibchas nan Gàidheal / Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh, 2006), 59.

¹⁹ While this may be indicative of the Highland palate in general, there were Gaels who did eat and enjoy muskrat, as confirmed by the autobiography of a renowned tradition-bearer who ate it during the year that he lived with a Mi'kmaw healer: Lauchie MacLellan, *Brìgh an Òrain / A Story in Every Song*, ed. John Shaw (Montreal & Kingston, 2000), 88–91. Thanks to John Shaw for this reference.

²⁰ Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 81, 116, 152–4, 155–6, 175, 188.

the homes themselves. John and Mary, belonging to a more mobile culture, retreat and disappear. The season of the autumn, when they disperse, parallels the symbolism of decline and death.

John and Mary, however, leave an impressively large knife behind them (not unlike antler-handled dirks used in the Highlands), which, as seen from the previous narrative, represents their power. The knife still remains potent: we are told that ‘it can take off a man’s beard,’ where ‘beard’ might be read in relation to manhood and potentially threatening forces. The power inherent in the knife, however, is claimed and kept by one of the Highland settlers. It becomes the valued memento of the first encounter, providing a visual symbol of the past and the former glory of its first inhabitants.

C. Feast at Sanndra

Another oral narrative describes an encounter between Catholic immigrants from the isle of Barra and Mi’kmaq at the locale that Highland settlers later named ‘Sanndra’ in Gaelic.²¹ Calum MacLeòid, a native of the Isle of Lewis who taught Celtic Studies at Saint Francis Xavier University in Antigonish,²² claimed in an article written in 1952 that he had recorded it from an unnamed man who was nearing eighty years of age.²³ He repeats this tale in his 1969 collection of Gaelic tales where it is attributed to Eòghann MacCoinnich of Grand Narrows.²⁴ The general elements of the tale were well known to Gaels in the region, for variants have been recorded from other tradition bearers.²⁵

Sheòl Iain MacNéill, a bhean, is a thriùir mhac, á Barraidh anns a’ bhliadhna 1799. An dèidh iomadh gàbhadh is cunnart-mara chur seachad, thàinig iad air tìr an Siorramachd Phictou, is às a sin rinn iad breacan-à-baile do Arasaig an Siorramachd Antigonish, air tìr-mór na h-Albann Nuaidhe. Ged a bha an dùthaich seo a’ tighinn riutha gu gasda an iomadh dòigh, bha an-fhois ’nan anam; bha fadachd orra gus a faiceadh iad beanntan is òban Cheap Breatainn, oir chuala

²¹ While Calum MacLeòid gives a different spelling of the name, I here use the form given in Seumas Watson, ‘Às a’ Choillidh Dhuibh: Cunntasan Seachais air a’ Chiad Luchd-àiteachaidh an Eilean Ceap Breatainn’ in Colm Ó Baoill and Nancy McGuire (eds), *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig* 2000 (Aberdeen, 2002), 275.

²² About whom see Campbell, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, 35.

²³ Calum MacLeòid, *Sgial is Eachdraidh* (Glasgow, 1977), 80.

²⁴ Idem, *Sgialachdan à Albainn Nuaidh* (Glasgow, 1969), 26–7.

²⁵ A later and shorter version of this tale from another informant is given in Watson, ‘Às a’ Choillidh Dhuibh’, 275.

iad fathunn gur b-i seo an tìr a b' fhaisge an cruth 's an cumadh ri Barraidh aca fhéin. Cha robh iad gun fhios cuideachd gun robh móran Innseanaich a bha air leth borb aineolach a' tàmh an "Tìr a' Gheallaidh," ach a dh'aindeoin gach cnap-starraidh a bha rompa, dh'fhàg iad Arasaig an ceann trì bliadhna.

Chuir iad cùl nan cóig ris a' Mhór-Roinn is sheòl iad suas caoiltean a' Bhras d'Or. Lean iad ris a' chladach a b-uile ceum, a' cumail sùla ri fuaradh, is ri fàsadh air son nan Innseanach ach dh'fhaireadh orra eadhon aon diùbh fhaicinn. 'S beag a bha fhios aca gun robh na b-Innseanaich a' leantainn an cùrsa gach latha, is a' fuireach gus an tigeadh iad gu tìr.

An dùil gun robh a b-uile nì aig fois, is na daoine allmharra mìltean air falbh, dhlùthaich na Barraich ri cùrsa mu leth-cheud slat a tuath air far am bheil Seantraigh an-diugh. Shìn iad ris a' choillidh a ghearradh às a bhonn, is bothain-logaichean a thogail, ach mun do gheàrr iad a' chiad chraobh, thùrlinn feachd de na b-Innseanaich orra le'n làn armachd. Cha robh na b-Innseanaich idir toilichte an uair a chunnaic iad na Barraich a' gabhail fasdaidh air an fhearann. Thuig na Barraich seo gu math luath, is leis an eagal a ghabh iad gum fiachadh na b-Innseanaich ri dìth-cheannadh a dhèanamh orra, chaidh Iain MacNéill air a ghluinean, is rinn e combarradh na croise. Cho luath agus a chunnaic ceann-cinnidh nan Innseanach an iomairt seo, rinn e réite ris na Barraich oir b' ann de'n aon chreideamh a bha iad le chèile. Air an dearbh latha sin fhuair na Barraich cead am fearann a bhith aca fhéin.

Chuir an cunnradh seo a leithid de aoibhneas air na Barraich is gun tug iad cuireadh do cheann-cinnidh nan Innseanach greum bidhe a ghabhail cuide riutha. Chladbaich na Barraich dà sbloc mhór anns an talamh. Bhruidh iad iasg ùr 's a' chiad sloc, is buntàta 's an dara sloc. An uair a fhuair ceann-cinnidh an earrann-bidhe aige fhéin, chrath fear de na Barraich gràinean salainn air an iasg. B' e seo a' chiad uair a bhlais an t-Innseanach air stuth de'n t-seòrsa seo, is leis a' mhaigaid a ghabh e air an annas ùr seo, dh'òrdaich e rùsg craoibhe-beithe lom làn salainn a bhith air a lìonadh dhà.

'S na linntean a dh'aom bha duine a' faighinn còir air fearann ann an dà dhòigh: le còir a' chlàidheimh, no le còir "ceathaich is uisge." 'S e sin ri ràdh, bha agad ri sabaid, no bha agad ri teine a thogail air an fhearann, is uisge a thoirt gu goil air an fbonn a bha dhàth ort. ('S e an "allodial system" a their iad ris 's a' Bheurla chruaidh.)

*'S ann air an tolmhan uaine seo far na thachair an réite eadar na h-Innseanaich is na Barraich, a tha Eaglais Chaluim Chille air a togail an-diugh, is 's e am Pìobaire Bànn a' chiad duine a chaidh a chàradh 's a' bhàdhun ri taobh na h-eaglaise 's a' bhliadhna 1845.*²⁶

Iain MacNéill, his wife, and his three sons, sailed from Barra in the year 1799. After getting through many dangers of the ocean they came to land in Pictou County, and from there they moved to Arisaig in Antigonish County, on the mainland of Nova Scotia. Although this land suited them very well in many ways, their spirits were restless. They had a longing to see the mountains and bays of Cape Breton, for they had heard a rumor that it was the land whose landscape was closest to that of their own Barra. They were not unaware that there were many Indians who were exceedingly barbaric and ignorant living in 'the Promised Land', but despite every obstacle that was before them, they left Arisaig after three years.

They left the mainland behind them and they sailed over to the straits of Bras d'Or. They followed the shore constantly, keeping an eye on the prevailing wind and on available shelter from the Indians but they failed to see a single one of them. Little did they know that the Indians were following their course every day and waiting until they would come to land.

Expecting that everything was safe, and that the strange people were miles away, the Barramen closed in on the coast that is about fifty yards north from the present location of Sanndra. They were about to begin to cut away the trunks of the trees, and to build log-cabins, but before they felled the first tree, a troop of Indians fell on them with a full complement of weaponry. The Indians were not at all pleased when they saw the Barramen taking possession of the land. The Barramen realised this very quickly and they became so frightened that the Indians would behead [i.e., scalp?] them, Iain MacNéill went down on his knees and made the sign of the cross. As soon as the chieftain of the Indians saw this action, he made peace with the Barramen, since they both

²⁶ MacLeòid, *Sgiallachdan à Albainn Nuaidh*, 26–7. Note that it is unclear whether the final two paragraphs were provided by the informant or whether they were additional commentary by MacLeòid.

belonged to the same religion. On that very same day, the Barramen received permission to have their own land.

This [land] settlement so pleased the Barramen that they invited the chieftain of the Indians to share a portion of food with them. The Barramen dug out two large pits in the ground. They boiled fresh fish in the first pit, and potatoes in the second pit. When the chieftain received his own share of food, one of the Barramen shook some grains of salt on the fish. This was the first time that the Indian had tasted this foodstuff, and he took such a liking to this new curiosity that he ordered the bark of a birch tree to be filled completely with salt for him.

In past eras a person asserted his right to land-holding in two ways: with ‘sword-right’, or by the right of ‘steam and water’. That is to say, you had to fight, or you had to build a fire on the land and bring water to boil on the soil that you wanted. (This is called ‘the allodial system’ in the harsh English language.)

It is on that green knoll, where the agreement was made between the Indians and the Barramen, that the Church of St Columba was built, and the Fair Piper was the first person to be interred in the graveyard next to the church in the year 1845.

As in previous tales, the Highlanders were warned that the Mi’kmaq were a savage people. The expectation of violence serves to heighten the drama of their encounter. The constant reminder that the Highlanders are being carefully watched and followed by them sustains the thrill of the chase. The deprecatory terms *borb* (barbaric), *allmbarra* (foreign), etc., create irony in the resolution of the story as the Gaels discover that they had more in common with the ‘savages’ than they had been led to believe by previous informants.

The recurrence of triplism in the tale—three sons, three years, and three residences in North America—suggests the influence of oral narrative styles. This narrative draws upon the tree symbolism mentioned previously. The immigrants intend to initiate their possession of the land by clearing it of trees: it is precisely when they are about to ‘attack’ the trees that the Mi’kmaq appear, presumably emerging from the forest itself. They assume a threatening pose, fully armed and displeased that the Highlanders have assumed occupation of their territory. A potentially violent encounter is prevented when the Mi’kmaq

recognise that the Highlanders are also Catholics (unlike many of the other British settlers). The resolution between ethnic groups is followed by a land grant giving Gaels ‘official’ permission to occupy the lands.

The peaceful co-existence of the two communities is cemented by a communal feast of fish and potatoes, echoing the modern idea of Thanksgiving and featuring primary foodstuffs emanating from the sea and land respectively. During the feast, the Gaels introduce the *Mi’kmaq* to salt; a condiment which supplements the elementary subsistence represented by fish and potatoes. The immigrants thus enhance the civilisation of their Indigenous neighbors with a token of their own culture which almost implies a kind of financial transaction.

The short discussion at the end of the tale about the two means of asserting possession of land—by force, or by fire—underscores that Gaels did not do so by force. The celebratory meal of boiled fish and potatoes, cooked with fire, seems to represent the second option, with the additional benefit that the feast has created a bond between the two peoples. The church built on the site of this encounter reinforces their common religious bond. It may also be significant that Saint Columba was the missionary responsible for converting the pagan Picts in early Scotland and was remembered for this in Gaelic tradition.

John L. Campbell of Canna made the first audio recording of an oral narrative in *Mi’kmaq* in 1937.²⁷ This tale, narrated by Grand Chief Gabriel Syllibuy, who is said by his granddaughter to have spoken Gaelic, describes how in the first encounter between these two people gifts were ritually exchanged: the *Mi’kmaq* gave the Highland settlers fire while the Highlanders gave the *Mi’kmaq* the Gaelic language. Like the Gaelic narrative, this tale needs to be read symbolically: each group gave the other some essential element of their own culture.

D. *The Camerons*

The idea that the land struggle could be resolved through individual contests of physical strength — that is, according to the ideals of heroic society — is found in another tale from Cape Breton. The ultimate source of this tale is unclear: in MacLeòid’s 1969 collection it is said to come from a manuscript written by Seumas Eòghainn (James Hugh MacNeil of Sydney, Cape Breton) and in MacLeòid’s possession (but since lost).²⁸ The same tale appears almost

²⁷ Campbell, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, 27.

²⁸ MacLeòid, *Sgialachdan à Albainn Nuaidh*, 41, 150.

verbatim (although missing a few flourishes given here) in the 1964 anthology by Creighton and MacLeòid. It is said in that source to have been recorded on disc from D. D. MacFarlane of South West Margaree,²⁹ but it is clear on the recording that MacFarlane is reading aloud from a text, presumably one supplied to him by MacLeòid.³⁰

O chionn còrr math agus ciad bliadhna thàinig fear Gilleasbuig Camshron á Srath Ghlais, an Albainn, is shuidhich e le theaghlach ann am Margairidh, an Eilean Cheap Breatainn. Thog a chuid mhac fearann dhaibh p-fhéin faisg air an athair, is bha gach aon diùbh trang a' leagail na coille, a' réiteach an fhearainn, is a' dèanamh gach ullachaidh airson taighean a thogail anns an d' rachadh iad a dh'fhuireach.

Là de na làithean bha fear de na mic d'am b' ainm Aonghus, gu trang a' leagail na coille air a bhaile fhéin, 'n uair a mhothaich e Innseanach mór coltach ri tighinn far an robh e ri 'g obair. Le briathran làidir, is e a' combarrachadh 'n a aodann, thug e bàirlinn do'n duine gheal a dh'fhàgail an àite gun dàil; gur ann leis-san a bha am fearann so, agus gun robh deagh chòir aig' air. Cha do leig am fear eile air gun cuala e e, is lean e ri obair gu bog, balbh. Thadhail an t-Innseanach fearann an duine ghil là an déidh là, 's e daonnan a' maoidheadh, 's a' cur an céill a chòir air an àite, ach cha robh dad aige air a shon. Mu dheireadh thall, 'n uair a thuing an t-Innseanach nach deanadh bruidhinn feum, thuirt e ris a' Ghàidheal mar so, "Rachamaid a ghleachd matà. Mas tusa a bhios an uachdar, fàgaidh mise an t-àit' agad, ach mas e mise a bhios an uachdar, 's e thusa a dh'fheumas falbh." Ghabh am fear eile an tairgse gu toileach, is chòrd iad mu'n àite, 's mu'n àm a choinnicheadh iad.

Chum an t-Innseanach ri fhacal is tràth an ath là bha e air làraich, is a bhean còmhla ris. Bha iad le chéile an deagh shunnd airson na còmbraige, is gun an tuilleadh dàlach thòisich a' ghleachd. Bha iad làidir, treun le chéile. Bha gach fear a' cur gu feum gach seòl a b'aithne dha. Fad greis ùine bha e duilich a ràdh có a bhuannaicheadh. Bha bean an Innseanaich a' leum mu'n cuairt mar neach air bhoile, 's i ag éigheach ri a companach am fear eile a chur gu làr.

Bha na fir a nis a' cruaidh leadairt a chéile. Dbeanadh iad creagan de'n bhogan agus bogan de'n chreagan; na clachan beaga dol an ìochdar 's na clachan móra teachd an uachdar. An t-àite bu lugha rachadh iad fodha, rachadh iad fodha chun

²⁹ Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeòid (eds), *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (Ottawa, 1979 [1964]), 274–5.

³⁰ Thanks to Anne Landin for a copy of this recording.

na glùine; 's an t-àite bu mhotha rachadh iad fodha, rachadh iad fodha chun an sgrùbain. Ach smaoinich an duine geal gun robh e fagus d'a naimbdean is thug e an togail bheag shoilleir ud air an Innseanach, is am prìoba na sùla bhual e ris an talamh e. Dh'èirich an t-Innseanach, ghlac e làmh a' Ghàidheil; dh'fhàg e beannachd aige, is an ùine gun bhi fada, dh'fhàg e Margairidh.

Móran bhliadhnaichean an dèidh so chaidh duine òg á Margairidh air chuairt do Newfoundland. Air dha a bhith aon là a' gabhail a shlighe troimh an àite, thàinig e gu camp Innseanaich is chaidh e a steach. Bha seann duine 'n a shìneadh an oisinn a' chàimp, is 'n uair a thuig e gur ann á Margairidh a thàinig an coigreach, dh'fheòraich e am b'aithne dha fear Aonghus Camsbron an sin. Fhreagair am fear eile gum b'aithne glé mbath. " 'S e duine glé làidir a tha sin," thuirt an seann duine, agus e a' leagail a chinn sòs air a' chluasaig. 'N uair a thuit e 'n a chadal is dòcha gun robh e a' brùadair air a bhith aon uair eile air ais ann am Margairidh a measg a chàirdean 's a luchd-eòlais; 's a' sìomanaich mu "na cnuic 's na glinn," mar a sgrìobh am bàrd Calum Mac Gill-Iosa nach maireann, mu'n Bhràighe :—

*"Chan eil àit' an diugh fo'n ghréin
'S am b' fheàrr leam fhéin bhith tàmhachd;
Na Bràigh na h-Aibhne measg nan sonn
O'm faighte fuinn na Gàidhlig."*³¹

Well over a hundred years ago, one Gilleasbuig Cameron came from Strathglass, in Scotland, and he settled himself and his family in Margaree, in the island of Cape Breton. His sons cultivated lands for themselves close to their father, and each one of them was busy felling the forest, improving the land, and making preparations to build houses in which they would go to live.

One day, one of the sons who was named Aonghus was busy felling trees on his own homestead when he noticed a large Indian who seemed to be coming to where he was working. Using strong words as he indicated with his facial expressions, he issued a demand that the white man leave the place immediately; that he was the one who owned this land, and that he had the proper rights to it. The other man did not let on that he heard him, and he continued his work half-heartedly

³¹ MacLeòid, *Sgialachdan à Albainn Nuaidh*, 41–2.

and silently. The Indian visited the land of the white man day after day, constantly remonstrating, and asserting his rights to the place, but he got nothing for it. Finally, when the Indian realised that talking would not do him any good, he said the following to the Gael, 'Let's wrestle, then. If you are the one who will prevail, I will leave your place, but if I am the one who will prevail, you are the one who must leave.' The other man took the offer willingly, and they agreed about the time and place that they would meet.

The Indian kept to his word, and early the next day he was present with his wife at his side. They were both in good spirits for the fight and without further delay the wrestling began. They were both strong and brave. Each man put every technique to use that he knew. For a good while it was difficult to say who would win. The Indian's wife was jumping around like a madwoman while she shouted at her partner to throw down his opponent.

The men were now fighting roughly with each other. They would make rocks of the marsh and a marsh of the rocks; the little stones descending and the big rocks ascending. The place that they would sink the least, they would sink to the knee; the place that they would sink the most, they would sink to the belly. But the white man thought that he was close to his enemies, and he gave that clear, little push to the Indian, and in the blink of an eye he threw him to the ground. The Indian arose, he shook the hand of the Gael; he gave his farewell, and in a short time, he left Margaree.

Many years after this a young man from Margaree went on a trip to Newfoundland. After he had been traveling one day, he came to an Indian's camp and he went inside. There was an old man lying in the corner of the camp, and when he realised that the stranger had come from Margaree, he asked him if he was familiar with one Aonghus Cameron who lived there. The other man answered that he knew him very well. 'That is one very strong man,' the old man said, as he let his head down on the pillow. When he fell asleep he was probably dreaming about being once again back in Margaree amongst his friends and relations, and wandering around 'the hills and glens', as the late poet Calum Gilles wrote about the Bràigh :—

‘There is no place in the world
 In which I would prefer to live
 Than Bràigh na h-Aibhne, amongst the heroes
 From whom the Gaelic tunes would be gotten.’

The encounter in this tale happens once again when a Mi’kmaw comes forth from the trees that a Highlander is felling. Clearing land of trees can be read in an agricultural society as a symbolic act of domesticating the landscape and taking possession of it. The Mi’kmaw’s protest against the occupation of land in the tale reflects Gaelic self-consciousness of the contention over land and resources. The initial response of Aonghus Cameron is to ignore these claims until pressed on the issue; this may be a reflection of realities at the time of settlement, when the Highland peasantry spilled into Cape Breton without official titles and Mi’kmaq had little means of asserting their own rights.³²

The challenge to resolve this conflict of interest by means of single combat reflects the heroic ethos of Gaelic society and relates to the notion of *còir claidheimh* (sword-right, a practice that can be seen in other Gaelic ‘clan sagas’³³) mentioned in tale C. The Mi’kmaw is portrayed as a worthy opponent who ‘kept to his word’ and is closely matched to the strength and techniques of the Highlander. The narrative clearly bears the influence of Gaelic heroic tales: the section from ‘Dheanadh iad creagan de’n bhogan’ (They would make rocks of the marsh) to ‘bhual e ris an talamh e’ (he threw him to the ground) is a ‘run’ (formulaic passage consisting of alliterative words and phrases) to be found in other early heroic tales.³⁴ This relates the action of Aonghus to Gaelic heroes of the past, thus elevating his status as an ancestral figure in the settlement of Cape Breton.

The second episode occurs not in Cape Breton but in Newfoundland, to which many Mi’kmaq from Nova Scotia resettled.³⁵ Here the unnamed Margaree Gael walks into a Mi’kmaw settlement without opposition: the absence of encounter may signify friendly relations between people, or perhaps that the power to resist encroachment has waned. That the latter may be intended is reflected in the depiction of the only human in the camp; an

³² Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations*, 206–8; Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders*, 210–12.

³³ Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 142.

³⁴ Ibid, 110, 196.

³⁵ Bennett, *The Last Stronghold*, 30–1.

elderly man who is half asleep. This is clearly meant to be the same man who lost to Aonghus Cameron in the wrestling match; he acknowledges the Highlander's strength, presumably to endorse Cameron's occupation of his former territory, and returns to his slumber.

The tale seems to reflect a lingering sense of guilt for occupying lands once held by Indigenous Americans in a way that also reflects the Gaels' own sense of exile. The ending of the tale quotes a song written by Malcolm Gillis of Margaree (†1929)³⁶ which has nearly attained the status of an island anthem amongst Gaelic speakers; it equates the nostalgia of the Mi'kmaw with that of the Highlander for the same locale.

E. MacThòmais has a dirk

A prose narrative background to the satirical song 'Tha biodag aig MacThòmais' was given in the popular book *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd Gaèlach* (1841), a volume that was reprinted in expanded form in Halifax in 1863. This source states that a claimant for the Fraser chieftaincy escaped to North America after killing a piper who played this satirical song about him, but says nothing of his life thereafter. Calum MacLeòid recorded an anecdote from Màiri Ealasaid NicNéill of Grand Narrows in Cape Breton no later than 1952³⁷ which picks up the story from there.

Seadh, ma-tà, gu dearbh, chuala mise am port sin roimbe, 's theireadh cuid às an t-Seann Dùthaich gun robh e càirdeach do MhacShimidh, ceann-cinnidh nam Frisealach. Uill, seo agaibh seanchas chuala mise mu dbéidhinn MhicThòmais.

Anns a' bhliadhna seachd ceud deug dà fhichead 's a naoi, bha feachd de shaighdearan Gàidhealach a' fuireach an Louisbourg, an Siorramachd Cheap Breatainn, is air latha Sàbaid àraidh chaidh iad a-mach air chuairt. An uair a ràinig iad iomall a' bhaile nach d' fhuair na h-Innseanaich greim orra. Thugadh air falbh iad gu ceann-cinnidh nan Innseanach an Eascasonaidh. An uair a thuing an ceann-cinnidh có às a thàinig iad, leig e cothrom coiseachd leotha 's thuirt e riutha gun innse do dhuine an Albainn gum b' esan MacThòmais nam biodag. A-rèir eachdraidh, theich MacThòmais le a bheatha á Albainn an dèidh dhà pìobaire a mharbhadh, pìobaire a bha a' cluich a' phuirt "Tha biodag aig MacThòmais" aig dannsa àraidh, 's MacThòmais fhéin 's an éisdeachd. Ràinig MacThòmais Alba Nuadh is ri tìde fhuair e inbhe ceann-cinnidh nan Innseanach. Tha iad ag ràdh eadhon

³⁶ Eachann MacDhughail (ed.), *Smeòrach nan Cnoc 's nan Gleann* (Glasgow, 1939), 1–2.

³⁷ MacLeòid, *Sgial is Eachdraidh*, 81–2.

*an-diugh fhéin gu bheil “Tòmas” ’na ainm cumanta a-measg nan Innseanach an Ceap Breatainn.*³⁸

Yes, then, indeed, I have heard that tune before, and some people from the Old Country said that he was related to Fraser of Lovat, the chieftain of the Frasers. Well, I’ll give you some lore that I heard about MacThòmais.

In the year 1749, there was a troop of Gaelic soldiers which was stationed in Louisbourg, in Cape Breton, and on one particular Sunday they went out for a trip. When they reached the outskirts of the settlement, the Indians got a hold of them. They were taken away to the chieftain of the Indians in Eskasoni. When the chieftain realised where they were from, he allowed them to go for a walk and he said to them not to tell anyone in Scotland that he was MacThòmais of the dirks. According to history, MacThòmais fled for his life from Scotland after killing a bagpiper, a bagpiper who was playing the tune ‘MacThòmais has a dirk’ at a particular dance while MacThòmais himself was in the audience. MacThòmais reached Nova Scotia and in time he attained the rank of the chieftain of the Indians. Even to this day they say that ‘Thomas’ is a common name amongst the Indians in Cape Breton.

The tale is set before Highland communities began to settle in Nova Scotia but after individual Highlanders had come to the region as soldiers in British regiments. Stories about their service as far back as the Seven Years’ War (probably the intended era of this tale, making the date given by the narrator about a decade too early) have been circulating until the present in Gaelic oral narrative in the region.³⁹

According to the tale, MacThòmais flees for his life and finds shelter amongst Indigenous Americans after he commits an offence against a Highland chieftain. There are rough structural analogues between this and the emigration of Gaelic communities from Scotland: MacThòmais corresponds to common Gaels; Simon Fraser of Lovat corresponds to landlords and the

³⁸ Idem, *Sgìalachdan à Albainn Nuaidh*, 80.

³⁹ See, for example, Màiri Chamshron, ‘Beagan m’a Sinnsirean agus an Caitheamh-Beatha an Albainn agus an Canada’, *Tocher*, 42 (1990), 402–7.

Highland élite (although, by coincidence, the emigration agent responsible for bringing many Barra people to this area was Major Simon Fraser⁴⁰); the offence corresponds to the taint of Jacobitism, religious recalcitrance (the immigrants in this locale remained Catholic), and perhaps the existential guilt of being less valuable than sheep.⁴¹

As soon as the soldiers go beyond the bounds of the military outpost, they are apprehended by the Mi'kmaq. This underscores the claim that the Mi'kmaq have on the territory as its natural occupiers. The capture of the soldiers by the Mi'kmaq also signals that control of the narrative has been taken over by them, relocating the scene of action from the military outpost of Louisbourg to the Mi'kmaq capital of Eskasoni (this detail, however, is an anachronism reflecting political geography at the time of the narration rather than the mid-eighteenth century).

The initially hostile encounter is alleviated by the chieftain who is a cultural mediator, belonging to both societies. That the chieftain was actually a Highlander in disguise has the potential to suggest that Highlanders and the Mi'kmaq have enough in common for Gaels to live in and assimilate into their society. The motif of a European becoming the chieftain of an 'Indian tribe' was a very common one in Euro-American literature and folklore, so this may be evidence of influences from popular fiction in English (a possibility also explored in the next tale). It is possible to read this motif in a positive light: MacThòmais is leading the Mi'kmaq against Anglo-British hegemony; a struggle that resonates with Gaelic Jacobite tradition.⁴² This again suggests that the tale could counter guilt Gaels may have felt about their presence worsening the living conditions of the Mi'kmaq.

The narrative suggests the need in the Gaelic community to build imaginative bridges towards the Indigenous community and to forge connections that will ultimately leave Gaelic influences upon Indigenous Americans without entirely (or even discernibly) altering their culture and identity. It also suggests the need to extend narratives begun in Scotland into the immigrant communities in North America: a need for narrative and cultural continuity. This narrative suggests the signs of interaction between oral tradition and printed texts, albeit in this case a Gaelic text from a popular songbook.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, 41, 49.

⁴¹ Ibid., 46–52. That the offence is committed with a dirk—a weapon representing his individual power—suggests symbolic connections with Tale B.

⁴² Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 34–5, 70–1.

F. The Bard MacGilleathain and the Kidnapped Son

Iain MacGilleathain ('Iain mac Ailein' in patronymic form, 'John MacLean' in English translation), also known in Gaelic by his complementary title Am Bàrd MacGilleathain in Nova Scotia, is an iconic figure in Gaelic immigrant tradition: one of the last of the professional poets who composed encomia for Highland gentry, he migrated to Nova Scotia in the year 1819 and his songs about his experiences have been sung continuously by Gaelic communities since that time in both Scotland and Nova Scotia. In fact, MacGilleathain used songs consciously to influence the decisions of his friends and relations still in Scotland, particularly in his native island of Tiree.⁴³

One narrative about his settlement in Nova Scotia was preserved in Tiree until recorded in 1966 by John MacInnes from Domhnall Chaluim Bàin. It begins with an accurate account of the method by which the virgin forest was turned into fertile agricultural fields by the pioneer settlers. Unfortunately, the recording is very difficult to understand and does not seem to have been transcribed previously. Uncertain words and phrases are marked with angle brackets.

Bha e fhé agus a' bbean a losgadh chraobhan, is a' leagail chraobhan, a' deanamh réiteach air son <gnothaich?> agus bha balachan beag aca air an robh 'Teàrlach'. Agus thàinig Innseanach mun cuairt agus sheas e tacan dha <m feitheamh>. Agus leum an t-Innseanach agus rug e air a' bhalach agus a-mach e leis a' bhalach. Agus a-mach Iain mac Ailein agus a' bbean as dèidh an Innseanaich. Agus b<?> an Innseanach, agus <b?>ha astar mór as a dhéidh. Agus thàinig iad gu abhainn agus tha talamh glé bhrèagha ann. Agus leig an t-Innseanach às a shin e. Agus bha Iain mac Ailein <toileach?> gu leòr. Cha robh réiteach no losgadh chraobhan <a thàinig an seo?> air an talamh réidh mar a bha e is bha an abhainn <los?>. Is lean an t-Innseanach còir. Chuir e suas shed còir. Agus dha na treis mhór <?> as a dhéidh sin bhiodh e air ais 's air aghaidh is sin am fearann a bha aig Iain mac Ailein a bha air a' chrìch aige, 'se an t-Innseanach a fhuair dha e. Bha e cur dragh air an Innseanach a bhith feitheamh an obair a bh' aca. Cha dèanadh e réiteach gu bràth. Bha an t-Innseanach eòlach is thug e leis iad is siud an dòigh a rinn e, ghoid e am balach. Agus <?> a' bhalach a thoirt leis, <?> thug e ionnsaigh an fhearainn, an fhearainn bhrèagha tha seo air taobh abhainn Bhàrnaidh.⁴⁴

⁴³ Alexander MacLean Sinclair (ed.), *Clàrsach na Coille* (Glasgow, 1881), xix, 96.

⁴⁴ Recording held in the School of Scottish Studies SA1966-104 (but also available from the *Pròiseact Thiriodh* website <http://www.tiriodh.ed.ac.uk/>, accessed 31 July 2009). Thanks to Rob Dunbar for pointing this source out to me and for providing me with

He himself and his wife were burning trees, and felling trees, making improvements for [agricultural] work and they had a very small son who was called ‘Teàrlach’. And an Indian came around and he stood for a while watching them. And the Indian leapt out and he grabbed the boy and went off with the boy. And Iain mac Ailein and his wife went off after the Indian. And the Indian <?>, and they were far behind him. And they came to a river and there was very beautiful land there. And the Indian let go of him there. And Iain mac Ailein was certainly pleased. There were no improvements or tree burning that had ever been done there, the land was ready as it was, and the river was <?>. And the Indian remained agreeable. He built a nice shed. And for a good while after that he went back and forth, and that is the land that Iain mac Ailein had, his own territory, and it was the Indian who found it for him. It bothered the Indian to be watching their work. He [Iain] would never have it finished. The Indian was wise and he took them there and the way in which he did it was that it kidnapped the boy. And <?> to take the boy with him, he took them towards the land, this beautiful land on the side of Barney River.

As in previous narratives, the encounter happens when the settlers are domesticating the landscape, represented by the felling and burning of trees. The encounter appears to be a hostile one initially, and the kidnapped progeny symbolises the precarious state of the future of the Gaelic community in the face of Indigenous opposition. The drama of this conflict is sustained by the chase through the woods.

The flow of events, and thus the narrative itself, is in the control of the Mi'kmaw in this tale: Iain mac Ailein and his wife can only follow him. Despite the assumed ill intentions of the Mi'kmaw, he kidnaps the boy only because he has no other way of communicating with Iain about the more desirable land he knows to be elsewhere. His goodwill towards the Gaels is clear. The unnamed Indigenous American creates an edifice for himself on the land, although he is constantly going ‘back and forth’; he thus seems caught between the sedentary lifestyle of European civilisation and the peripatetic lifestyle of Indigenous Americans (at least as commonly represented in imaginative literature). This liminality reflects his role as a cultural mediator on behalf of the immigrants.

his notes about it and to Simon Innes for help transcribing some difficult phrases. See also Rob Dunbar, ‘Iain MacGilleain, “Bàrd Thighearna Chola”, agus Tiriodh’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 24 (2008), 181–206.

Novels about Europeans who had been kidnapped by Indigenous Americans were quite popular in the nineteenth century and it is not beyond question that these may have had some influence on this narrative. That Gaels found Indigenous Americans to be compelling characters is suggested by several translations from English into Gaelic appearing in the popular periodical *Cuairtear nan Gleann* in 1840⁴⁵ and a tale about Tecumseh which was included in the 1841 emigrant guide to North America written in Gaelic and mentioned above.⁴⁶

III Conclusions

The recurrence of specific motifs across these narratives—weapons representing power, food and feasting representing social integration (or the inability to integrate), felling trees as a European mode of domesticating landscape, the close association between the forest and Indigenous Americans, the role of individual Indigenous Americans as cultural mediators—confirms a common symbolic vocabulary for describing and explaining these first encounters within the immigrant Gaelic community, based on the inherited repertoire of Gaelic oral tradition. Having become Gaelic oral narratives, these tales acquired the characteristics of that medium and must be read and understood according to traditional rhetorical and stylistic conventions. Even if motifs were borrowed from narratives (oral or written) in English, they have been adapted within a framework of traditional Gaelic literary conventions and aesthetics for the purposes of the Gaelic community.

The significance of these tales is not in their accuracy in recounting ‘historical facts’ but their articulation of perceptions. These perceptions may be a reflection of those at the time of settlement to some degree but cannot be safely projected back beyond the time at which they were narrated. Some of these narratives acknowledge contention over land rights between natives and incomers but the outcome is not rationalised through recourse to notions of racial superiority or claims of being members of a more advanced (and hence worthy) civilisation, as generally found in the polemics of empire and

⁴⁵ *Cuairtear nan Gleann*, September 1840, 155–8; November 1840, 206–8.

⁴⁶ Reprinted in Richard Cox and Colm Ó Baoill (eds), *Ri Linn nan Linntean: Taghadh de Rosg Gàidhlig* (Ceann Drochaid, Scotland, 2005), 65–7. The tale related his name to the Gaelic words *Deagh-Chuimse* (‘Good-Aim’) and the author (probably Robert MacDougall) makes explicit parallels between Gaelic and Indigenous American societies, as well as their common loyalty to the British authorities.

white supremacy. Although the first encounter always looks hostile initially, these appearances either turn out to be false or to be resolvable through some kind of mutually agreed upon process which reflect the heroic ethos of Gaelic society, a common religion, and/or the ideals of hospitality.

Tale C acknowledged that Gaelic tradition recognised two means of acquiring land, one of them being *còir claidheimh* (sword-right). This term was used to describe the *de facto* right-by-force land occupancy which Highland clans had practiced for centuries in contest against each other and, often, against the will of the Crown.⁴⁷ While Eòghann MacCoinnich (the reciter) did not state that this was practiced against Indigenous Americans in Nova Scotia, disgruntled inhabitants of the estates of MacLeod of Harris were said in 1772 to be eager to emigrate to America where they could conquer land 'from the Indian with the Sword'.⁴⁸ That violent clashes did occur can hardly be doubted; one spot near the shore in Antigonish County was called *Rubha nan Innseanach* (Indian Point) because of 'the hostility of the Indians' (although no narrative is provided).⁴⁹

Tale C looks like it may be a mythical reworking of Tale A. They concern the same settlement of Catholic MacNéills in Christmas Island in which Highlanders come to land from the sea, are met by hostile Mi'kmaq, and cement friendly relations by means of an exchange of fish and potatoes. Tale C has many more of the stylistic features and elaborations of Gaelic oral tradition, suggesting how the portrayals of first encounters may have developed as they circulated in the community (or how they may have been expurgated in creating accounts for an English-speaking audience).

Indigenous Americans are not just passive victims in these tales: they typically initiate contact and often establish the means of resolution of conflict. This must have a basis in historical experiences but it may also reflect the desire amongst the Gaelic community, fresh from their own traumas, to believe that Indigenous Americans wanted to find peaceable solutions that would be mutually binding and beneficial.

The sense of exile and dislocation projected upon the Indigenous American characters in some of these narratives was not just a reflection of the initial migration from Scotland to Canada: from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the present day the Nova Scotian Gaelic community has struggled to remain rooted, despite unfavorable economic conditions and the lure of

⁴⁷ Newton, *Warriors of the Word*, 142–3.

⁴⁸ Eric Richards, 'Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire' in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the Realm* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 111.

⁴⁹ MacLean (ed.), *History of Antigonish*, 45.

urban centres in Canada and the United States.⁵⁰ This idea is quite explicit in Tale D but seems to colour the background of other tales as well.

This article suggests ways in which pre-existing narratives, narrative structures, and motifs in Gaelic tradition, brought by the immigrants with them from Scotland and perpetuated in some communities to the present, helped to condition the interpretation and narration of current and past events. The function of these narratives would have also had an influence on their form and content. Tales were told in immigrant communities over the generations to explain their origins, assert the resilience of members in the face of difficult conditions, and provide a sort of charter myth justifying the existence of communities. Heroic characters provided precedents and role models for ongoing challenges. Gaels were aware of the hardship endured by Indigenous Americans during this time and such foundation tales may have been psychologically useful to counter guilt and cognitive dissonance over the displacement of Indigenous peoples.

The analysis also demonstrates that any penetrating account of the Scottish Highland experience requires careful consideration of Gaelic culture, especially its literary and linguistic expressions and conventions. The history of Highland settlement in North America far too often relies solely on documents written in English by and/or for anglophones and reveals little about the perceptions and experiences of the immigrants themselves. This problem can only be rectified by means of the record made by and for the Gaelic community itself, even if these materials are used in conjunction with the more numerous texts in English.⁵¹

While it is difficult to determine how common the sentiments in these tales were amongst North American Gaels, it is notable that into the twentieth century Gaelic tradition bearers displayed a great interest in the customs and beliefs of neighbouring Indigenous Americans.⁵² Some Nova Scotian Gaels had knowledge of Mi'kmaw customs and appeared to have absorbed their antipathy for their enemies, the Mohawks.⁵³

⁵⁰ Margaret MacDonell (ed.), *The Emigrant Experience* (Toronto, 1982), 165–83.

⁵¹ Michael Kennedy, “‘Lochaber no more’: A Critical Examination of Highland Emigration Mythology” in Marjory Harper and Michael Vance (eds), *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory: Scotia and Nova Scotia c. 1700–1990* (Halifax, 1999), 267–97.

⁵² *Mac-Talla* 17 February 1894; MacLeòid, *Sgialachdan à Albainn Nuaidh*, 62–3. Amongst the lore recorded in Gaelic from a native of Barra who emigrated to Canada but soon returned to Scotland were detailed observations about the burial customs of Indigenous Americans (School of Scottish Studies SA1974.58.B3).

⁵³ As noted by Robert Dunbar, ‘Identity and Images of Other Peoples: How Other

A great deal of work remains in locating and indexing primary sources in Gaelic—manuscripts, newspapers, audio recordings, and other primary records—which may yet bring other such texts to light from Nova Scotia and elsewhere in North America. These may contribute substantially to our understanding of the wider dynamics of the Gaelic immigrant experience, especially regarding the responses of Highlanders while under pressure to assimilate to the norms and expectations of the dominant anglophone hegemony and to identify with the ideologies of conquest and colonisation.⁵⁴

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Ethnic Groups are Represented in Nova Scotia Gaelic Tradition', unpublished paper presented at Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 2002; a negative view of the Mohawks is demonstrated, for example, by the satirical song 'Òran nam Mohawks' in Calum I. M. MacLeòid (ed.), *Bardachd à Albainn Nuaidh* (Glasgow, 1970), 75–7.

⁵⁴ Newton, 'Celtic Cousins or White Settlers?'.