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The Separatist Movement in Cape Breton • A Talk with Dr. Robert Morgan, Archivist, Beaton Institute, College of Cape Breton. (The word "separatist"--we hear it a lot lately in relation to Quebec. Is this what we mean when we use that word in relation to Cape Breton after 1820?) Bob Morgan: In a way they are similar: it was an attempt by Cape Breton to break away politically from Nova Scotia, which is what Quebec separatists would like to do with regard to Canada, because separatists in Quebec believe they are being put down economically, socially, and politically. Well, Cape Bretoners felt much the same way. After annexation in 1820 (that is, after Cape Breton, which from 1784 to 1820 was a separate colony, was linked to Nova Scotia by a royal proclamation), Cape Bretoners felt they did not have a fair number of representatives; there wasn't enough money being paid on roads and bridges; that the distance to Halifax was too great; that Halifax wasn't really interested in the problems down here. And then there was the whole legal aspect, which separatists of Quebec don't have on their side. See, the annexation was not legal according to British law. The king had no right to just take the island and annex it to Nova Scotia. (One thing the Quebec separatists say is that they are losing their language and their culture. Was there any sense that this was a concern here in 1820?) What the Cape Breton separatists say is that our interests are different from those of Nova Scotia--but I think those interests are mainly economic and political. See, when you think of Cape Breton in 1820, the Scottish migration is just getting into its stride, the flood is pouring in--and those people, most of them, are Gaelic speaking, and they don't know what's going on in Sydney. Sydney was the capital of Cape Breton between 1785 and 1820. And the greater part of the people living around the capital were either loyalists or people from England. (Loyalists are Americans who left the United States, choosing to remain loyal to England after the American Revolution.) You have largely a developing population of Scotch, newly arrived and unaware of the problems--and a lot of these people are arriving after annexation. So the greatest centre of separatism you get is in the Sydney area where, after annexation, the property values fell--because the government jobs were lost. In effect, they were transferred to Halifax. When Nova Scotia took over Cape Breton, they dismissed everybody from office except one man, Crawley, who was the Surveyor-General of the island--they needed him because he knew the island and he knew the Indians. Knowing the island was especially important, because the land grant system was in such chaos--and it was the fault of the Colonial Office in Britain. They had allowed land grants from 1785 to 1788 and then cancelled them. Then from 1788 to 1817 no land grants were permitted--you were only given leases or licenses of occupation. Then in 1818 Lieutenant-Governor Ainslie of Cape Breton wrote to the Colonial Office and said. Look, if you don't start giving out land grants, I'm going to start giving them myself. They wrote back and said. Oh, we forgot to inform you-- you've been allowed to grant land the last 2 or 3 years, all the other colonies have been allowed to do it. (So, when we talk about being separate, it does



not mean Cape Breton wanted to be entirely autonomous from Britain.) Right, we were a colony. Moreover, we had a House of Assembly. But it was never called. That sounds strange. When the colony was set up in 1784 by the Colonial Office, we were given a Lieutenant-Governor--that would be roughly equivalent to a Prime Minister now, who had a great deal more power than he does today--and an Executive Council which was roughly a Cabinet--a group of men who were appointed to advise the Lieutenant-Governor--usually wealthy men at the top of the colony, chief businessmen, doctors, lawyers'. Then below that--we say below in our system--you have the House of Assembly, where people would be elected to represent areas, as we have now in MLAs. We were given a House of Assembly, on paper. It was never called. The representatives were never elected. I know it sounds strange, but legally it's very important that the colony was granted a House of Assembly, despite it was never called. (And whose choice was it to never call the elections and never bring the House of Assembly together?) The Colonial Office. A number of people, including some Lieutenant-Governors, asked for the House of Assembly--but (33)