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Allan the Ridge MacDonald, Gaelic Poet An Introduction to the Mabou Bards by Effie Maccorguodaie Rankin Allan the Ridge arrived in Mabou around 1816 as a young man. I don't know what he'd composed, if anything, before he came over. But I'm sure that he would have, because he certainly had poetic abilities on his arrival. He composed a song called "Crossing the Atlantic," very interesting in itself. He, to me, was the best of the poets in Mabou, grandfather of it all. From his son Alexander's correspondence with this Keith Norman in Scotland, we can see that he had a tremendous amount of knowledge passed on to him. And he retained his knowledge of history, of genealogy, of poetry; and this came from his MacDonald background, his ancestors in Scotland. He got that appellation--Allan the Ridge-- because he lived on Mabou Ridge for some time after his arrival in Cape Breton. I think they just used the word "ridge," you know, gave it the Gaelic sound. Afterwards, the family moved to Antigonish County. This is where we lost them to a certain extent. But most of their poetry was composed in this area. The Mabou poets in particular, the best ones, came from the Keppoch-Lochaber district. There's a long tradition of excellent bards from that area. And they all have an interesting history. In Scotland, the big names, MacDonalds, most of them-- Iain Lom, Silis of Keppoch--Silis Nighean Mhic Raonail, really--MacDonald of Keppoch, a leading poetess in her day, Domhnall Mac-Fhionnlaidh nan Dan and Domhnall Donn. So the MacDonald poets of Mabou--the Bohuntin bards; that's the area in Keppoch they came from--many of them had this tradition behind them, coming (to Canada), and were very aware of it. They were tradition bearers as well as being poets. Some of them could have been illiterate in one sense--maybe they never wrote their poetry--but they certainly composed it and passed it on. And much of that is extant in Scotland today. The Iain Lom--very, very famous, sort of soldier-poet--he documented the Montrose Wars, the 17th century conflicts in the Highlands. Silis, the poetess--she's also very well known for her political involvement in the troubles and disputes of the day, and also for her religious poetry. The Bohuntin bards were trained in an oral tradition. Poetry was just part of their lifestyle, and I think this is what gives us poetry like what came out of the Mabou area in the early Iain Lom was poet laureate to King Charles II. But as a rule, poetry was localized. But the great ones, I think, went further, they went beyond their own areas. And Keppoch in particular is noted for this. Their bards were political--they were aware of the events which were happening throughout Scotland in their own day. And I think this carried through into Mabou in the early days. Allan the Ridge was a local poet; he composed about local events and what happened in his own area. But he was aware on a much wider scale of, for example, emigration to Nova Scotia. He was aware of what was happening throughout Scotland before he left. (Do you think these poems were written with the intention of singing?) Definitely. Yes. This was a way of keeping them alive. Especially when your audience for the most part could not read the song anyway. So it was no good



to anybody to have it written down. (Or to have it simply recited with? out singing?) Yes, it's possible, but I think that most of them would have been sung. There is one of Allan the Ridge's-- it's a sort of praise poem to his own clan, the MacDonalds of Keppoch. And it reads ex? cellently when you read it. But I know that the air is given to it, and it would have been sung. Quite often poets merely took the air of another song and adapted it for use with their song. That happened often. You'll find a chorus given which really belongs to another song. This was one method of easy transmission. But some of the airs, I'm sure, were original com? positions by the poets themselves. (Why did Allan the Ridge come to Canada?) He's told us himself why he came. It was to improve on his quality of life. He has a very famous retort to a cousin of his, John the Hunter MacDonald. He arrived in Mabou at a later date. And the Hunter was the kind of person who refused to adapt to the new land, and he always was nostalgic for Scotland. He compared Cape Breton very unfavourably with Scotland. But Allan re? torts, and answers his criticisms. And he (37)