

[Page 17 - Hector Carmichael, a Maker of Songs](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 7](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1974/3/1

Hector Carmichael will be 87 in August. He probably represents the last of a great Gaelic tradition as practised on Cape Breton • the local historian as a maker of songs. The songs were sung mostly at parties and millings; especially at millings, the true joy of which we can get only the barest hint today • the joy of a time when the cloth was locally woven and had to be milled, and the singing served both as entertainment and a way of keeping everyone pounding the cloth in rhythm, and everyone knew the true story behind the often exaggerated telling in the song. Old songs were sung and thus kept alive, and new local songs were made to these older tunes, usually retaining the old chorus intact. Sometimes a new song was made on the spot; often one person would make a few verses and another would pick it up and add to it • and because the tune was familiar it was not long before the whole community knew the song. Here is a song that the late Garrett MacDonald of the Meadow Road made about Hector Carmichael. It is called Eachann agus n "Sparrows" (Hector and the Sparrows), sung to the air of "Ho ro, 's toigh leam fhein thu" (Ho ro, you are my darling), , " " . ; . , " " ? ? ' . ' , " " ' xx iv: S- 4??fM'??- 1) 'S tha'n t-each aig Hec' am bliadhna Gun sian ach g' bheil an deo ann S'e 'n t-each aig Alexander An samhla ghabhas a phrobhadh. 2) Cha dean fodar feum dha 'S de reusd a chumas beo e Dh'ith na sparrows siol dheth Tha shabhall am bliadhna beo leo', 3) Latha's e 'ga fuadach Gun tug e suas an Cobh air Dh'iarraidh ghunna aig sandaidh 'S gun d' sheall iad dha 'n doigh air. 4) Thuirt Katy ris an uairsin "Cuir bhuaic 's gun thu eolach," 'S ann thuirt e, "Tha e 'easy\* Bha J. P. gam' sheoladh," 5) 'Bhurst' e orr' air siaradh Bha ceud dhiubh ann an comhlan 'S cha deach srada riamh 'annt 'S bha iongnadh gu leoir air. 6) Bha Calum Ruadh ag innse Gum b' iongnadh nach do reoth' e Ri sealg orr' aig a' bhathaich 'Se dha dhiubh riamh a leoin e. 7) Tha shabhall a nis na stiallan Mar chriathar a h-uile bord dheth \*Se Ron a bha 'ga innse 'S bi'n fhirinn aige 'n comhnaidh. Hector and the Sparrows: 1) This year. Hector's horse is barely alive; a comparison with Sandy's horse will prove this, 2) What on earth will keep him alive when the fodder is useless: The sparrows ate the grain off it, for his (Hector's) barn is full of them this year. 3) One day when he was driving them away, he went up to the Cove to ask for Sandy's gun • and they showed him how to use it. 4) Said Katy to him then, "You are not used to it • put it away." But he replied, "It's easy. J. P. was instructing me." 5) He blasted them from the west. There were 100 of them in a group • but not a shot went into them and he was quite amazed, 6) Red Malcolm was saying that it was a wonder he never froze while stalking by the barn (byre). All he ever accomplished was to wound two of them! 7) His barn is now shell-torn, each board is like a sieve; twas Ron who described it and isn't he always so truthful! Our thanks to Effie MacCorquodale. Mabou. for both her transcription and translation of the Gaelic songs; and to Donald Garrett and Catherine MacDonald for providing the song about the sparrows made by Garrett MacDonald. Cape Breton's Magazine/!