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Michael Coleman: A Cape Breton-Irish Connection From an on-going conversation with Paul Cranford It is 100 years since the birth of fiddler Michael Coleman. He came from County Sligo in Ireland. He made forty 78 rpm records in New York during the '20s and '30s. And while his name is little known to most listeners who are not players, Michael Coleman had a tremendous effect on an element of Cape Breton music. In celebration of the Michael Coleman centenary, we talked with Paul Cranford, a careful student of Cape Breton music. Paul Cranford: I would say there's no question he would be the most influential fiddler in this century, possibly in any idiom of fiddling. Maybe that's not true if you include some classical musicians such as Fritz Kreisler or Heifetz, or jazz fiddler Stephane Grappelli. They'd all be more well-known globally. But Michael Coleman is also very well-known globally, and he influenced people everywhere. His style of fiddling was certainly an influence in Cape Breton. There were already pockets of Irish fiddling in Cape Breton that had a local style and a local repertoire. And as the 78 records started coming out, those recorded tunes would be added to the local repertoire. This happened both for the music like Michael Coleman--the Irish 78's--and it also happened when Cape Breton musicians started making 78's. Michael Coleman had a distinctive individual style. He was a wonderful player who put his own touch to it, his own settings of tunes. Although he often played tunes that were already well known, he just played them so beautifully and with so much feeling and expression that musicians everywhere tried to copy him. He'd take a tune like "The Boys of the Loch." which was a good straightforward reel. But when he played it, he turned it into a work of art. Extra variations, and the way he'd fit it in with another tune so they'd just fit together like a glove. He had a real knack of putting medleys together that really suited each other. We've also had influential recording artists like that here in Cape Breton. When Winston Fitzgerald put a medley of tunes down, he carved it out so well that when people heard it, they tried to play it as Winston played it. They'd try to copy Winston. And the medley became a standard medley. Instead of being thought of as separate tunes, they'd all of a sudden be thought of as a unit. "Archie Menzies" followed by "Fisher's Hornpipe," for example. The same thing happened with Coleman medleys. Recording is such a powerful medium, especially where people are learning and they can hear a finished product over and over. It's an easier way to learn, really, than the way the old people had to learn, where you had to listen really carefully, and remember it, and recreate it as you remember it. The old way was a very different way of learning, compared to having a tape recorder or a record player that can repeat over and over and over again, until you master it--or as close as you feel you can. I mean, nobody can totally imitate somebody--but you can get a lot closer with mechanical recording devices. So recordings have changed the learning process. Learning by ear always means there can be slight changes. And even developed musicians always make slight adjustments to tunes they learn from a book. But when tunes are learned from a tape the tendency is to copy everything--phrasing, sound, swing,



intonation. In other words there is less individual creativity involved when you learn a tune that way. (And recordings set the standard.) That's right. And that makes the music somewhat more difficult for some--it makes it easier to learn, but it also gets the standard technically higher, and so it possibly would scare some people away from learning--from starting at the beginning-- because they'd think it's too difficult. Whereas I think if you went back to the era before recordings, everybody would take a crack at it, even if it meant they only learned one tune in their life. 83