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Published by Ronald Caplan on 1991/8/1

The Great Famine in Cape Breton, by Dr. Robert J. Morgan, Archivist, Beaton Institute, UCCB This article gives valuable insight into a pivotal period in Cape Breton history. As Dr. Morgan sums it up, the famine "deeply affected Cape Breton. It increased the wealth and power of the island's chief merchants, devastated the new settlers, impoverished established farmers, put a fifty-year halt to immigration to the island, hastened emigration • and forced the diversification of agriculture, which ensured that such a famine would never again occur on Cape Breton Island." Cape Breton experienced dramatic political, economic and demographic changes during the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1820, the island was annexed to Nova Scotia; in 1826, the General Mining Association assumed ownership of the coal mines; and between 1802 and 1845, approximately 30,000 Scots immigrated to the island. This was a pioneer period, during which immigrants first came in contact with a new political environment, and carved out properties to begin a new life on the island. The second half of the century witnessed the consolidation of these developments, as Scottish immigration ended and the settlers adjusted to the demands of their new environment. This evolution was hastened by the disastrous events which occurred between 1845 and 1851, when potato rot reduced the island to a state of near-starvation. Potato rot, or blight (*Phytophthora infestans*), which flourishes in cool damp weather, is a fungus which attacks the leaves and tubers of potatoes. First, irregular dark green to purplish-black spots form on leaves. Infected areas quickly turn black, resembling frost injury. Secondary bacteria and fungi often invade tubers, producing a slimy, foul-smelling rot which spreads throughout storage areas, resulting in the total loss of stored potatoes. This situation continues as long as dampness prevails. During these same years, though with less disastrous results, since it was not as widely cultivated, the island wheat crop was frequently infested with wheat fly. This is a small insect whose eggs burrow into the wheat stems and destroy the plant. Neither the rot nor the fly was properly understood or properly treated during the period under discussion. Potato rot struck other areas during the same period, including Ireland and Scotland, resulting in mass starvation and the emigration of thousands from those nations. Nova Scotia, with its damp climate, offered prime conditions for the spread of the disease. It is not certain when potato rot arrived in the province, though it may have reached parts of the mainland as early as 1843. The blight reached its zenith when most of the province was affected during the last weeks of August and September, 1845, after a spell of wet, hot weather with unusually warm nights. In Cape Breton, the disease spread from west to east. The stored tubers were destroyed at Lake Ainslie as early as the winter of 1844-45, leaving no seed for planting that spring. By summer, Port Hood's crop had "suffered severely"; one third of the crop at the Gut of Canada had rotted; Margaree claimed a 75 per cent loss; and the Richmond County and Baddeck areas were affected. The Sydney region, however, reported only a small loss. It appears that, on the whole, the rot in 1845 was generally worse



on mainland Nova Scotia. By 1846, however, it had taken a firm hold on the island. 1845-51 Cape Breton was particularly vulnerable to the disease and its effects. The island was still in a pioneer stage of development, which other parts of Nova Scotia had left behind in the 1820s. Hence, 'The poor settlers, if in distress, are not surrounded by old and wealthy Townships, upon the good feeling and resources of which they can fall back; they are often isolated, and if their own slender resources fail, there is no succour at hand.' They were made even more vulnerable by their dependence on a single crop: as one group of settlers wrote, "it is a well known fact the potatoe is the only article on which a poor man and family have to live upon for years on new back land farms in the island of Cape Breton." The immigration of poor settlers into the island had continued long after it had ceased on the mainland. The first wave of Scottish immigration to Nova Scotia, heaviest between 1783 and 1803, was composed of people of varying occupations, who had left Scotland voluntarily and who had travelled unassisted. Cape Breton received a few of these. Between 1803 and 1815, as the Scottish clearances intensified, poor and more desperate crofters, labourers and small tenants arrived, many going to the best vacant lands in Cape Breton. However, in the years following Waterloo, the kelp industry, which had temporarily supported evicted Hebridean crofters, collapsed under European competition. As a result, over 19,000 of the poorest people left Scotland, mainly for Cape Breton; this emigration continued throughout the 1820s, peaking in 1828. Finally, during the 1830s and 1840s, thousands more joined family members already on the island. Since the last-mentioned were the poorest and last to arrive, they squatted on what was left for them • the least desirable land in the remotest areas. Abraham Gesner estimated that most of the 1,500 people who had arrived in Cape Breton in 1842 were squatters on private property. Often these people, after improving the land, would be ejected, only to wander elsewhere: "With a pig, a cow, and a few cakes of maple sugar, some are ready to migrate at an hour's notice." Official Home of "Your Pace or Mine?" Abbass Stadia Ltd. OVER ( ONE HOUR FILM PROCESSING~) ot's'IRv"!! Passport Photographs While You Wait 5" X 7" Enlargements or Reprints in Only 20 Minutes! Weddings Commercial & Industrial • Family Groups Graduation ABBASS STUDIO LTD. 170 Townsend St., Sydney \* 564-8234 or 564-6491 SERVICE TO CAPE BRETON