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Joe Neil MacNeil: A Talk about Tales INTRODUCTION: All his life, Joe Neil MacNeil was absolutely devoted to the Gaelic language. He died in October 1996, while we were preparing this issue. At his wake, his friend and neighbour Jackie MacNeil said that Joe Neil could be summed up in three sentences: that he had tremendous knowledge; that he had the capacity to put that knowledge into forms that anybody could understand; and that he was generous with his knowledge, ready to share. Over the years, we talked to Joe about his role as a Gaelic storyteller. We knew that the stories told in the book Tales until Dawn were the stories as he had first heard them. And we also knew that Joe was capable of remarkable reconstruction of the tales, as in "Iain Mac an Iasgair Mhoir" in Issues 16 and 17 of Cape Breton's Magazine. Joe Neil also remembered and translated into Gaelic stories that he memorized from his English schoolbooks, like "The Poor Cobbler" in Issue 54. He considered those translations as giving that much more to the Gaelic. Twenty-five years ago, Joe Neil was in the first issue of Cape Breton's Magazine. He was there in Issues 4, 5, 16, 17, 19, 22, 44, 50, 54, 63, and 66. His information, concern and warnings are still to be heard: he told us years ago that a storyteller needs listeners. "You need both sides. There has to be a side that produces the sound and there has to be an ear to hear it, otherwise it doesn't register." The following comes from our ongoing conversations....

From Conversations with Joe Neil MacNeil Now when I was over in Scotland, we were travelling down through, and they were referring to the place where the men (in a tale) were going to the island. Now, I heard that story--I must have heard that story over 60 years ago. It was told over here (in Cape Breton). The man that was telling us that story, now whether he had it right or wrong, or how it was.... Well, he had it there were three sons. They were Neil and Donald and John. The three of them were going (each) in a boat to this island. And whichever one of them would get there first, he'd be the owner of the island. I guess their father owned the island, or (was) the landlord that owned the island. And as they were making their way to this island.... Now, they (in Scotland) had a little different version--they only had the two (brothers) in it. But (in Cape Breton) I heard him telling with three. And John was losing. The others were gaining, gaining on him. But Donald discovered that Neil was holding up--if anything, that he was just holding his own. And he was perhaps very little ahead of him-- maybe just a short distance, a matter of a few yards ahead of him. So he took his sword and he cut off his (own) hand, and he threw his hand in on shore. And he said that his flesh and blood was on that island, ahead of the others. And of course, (now) he was the owner of the island. But he was taking a great chance on bleeding to death, doing so! But it could have been that he did it.

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