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The Cape Breton Fiddler A Talk with Allister MacGillivray For the past two years, Allister MacGillivray has been searching out information about Cape Breton fiddlers--travelling the island and beyond, talking to anyone who would sit still and comparing one interview with another, trying to set the record straight. We spent an evening with him while he was in the last stages of preparing his book, THE CAPE BRETON FIDDLER (College of Cape Breton Press), and the following comes from that conversation. This talk (and the list of some available examples of traditional Cape Breton fiddling that comes at the end) should serve as an introduction and perhaps pursue the music. Allister MacGillivray, Breton Cove: Fairies are always associated with music. They were mischievous, but not destructive like banshees--there wasn't that kind of ominous atmosphere around them. They always bothered people who had musical talents. So if there were families that were known for great music, the fairies would gather around those homes and linger at the windows and what not, to hear the music--just come to hear their music and hang around. The MacLellan family, for instance. Now that's not just Big Ronald, who had his bow supposedly under those circumstances--but the family would tell me generally, they were having horses' manes braided all the time, little tricks like that happening a lot. It was supposedly because the music was attracting them. Oh, lots of people have seen the horses' hair braided; I've run into lots of people who've seen that. But they claim it's dying down, for whatever reason. One of the things was, if you encountered a fairy witch sometime and she was involved in some kind of a prank around a farm or something, and you discovered her--if you were to betray her secret to the owner of the farm, they would start putting out charms to harm the fairy people. So she would realize that and she would make a deal with you, to give you control of any musical instrument of your choice. That you'd never be beaten, say, at the violin or the harp or whatever it would be. That's one way you could acquire great talents from the fairies. Another way was that you could be abducted into a fairy hill. You'd just disappear from the face of the earth for a year. When you materialized again, you'd have this tremendous command over musical instruments. The way it was described to me--as the abducted person was taken into this fairy hill--it was like a little cave--the musical instruments were supposed to be hanging on the wall, and you'd pick your choice of them. And you'd become a master of that. But the one dealing with Ronald MacLellan is a little bit rarer. He was from Cleveland and had a fairy bow--this would be Theresa MacLellan's father. He was staying with his aunt in Glendale, and one day when the aunt was bringing cows home from pasture she felt a whiz go by her ear. She looked down to the ground. There was an arrow in the shape of a fiddle bow, stuck in a mound of some sort. She looked around-- she was in an open pasture--there was nobody could have fired it. So she drew out the arrow. I guess she must have known the significance of it, because she took the thing home. They had open doorways in the houses in those days, where they weren't boarded in or insulated, and they used to have little cubbyholes all



around the door? way. So above the main door of the house she could put a basket of all her little treasures, and that little arrow or bow was stuck in that basket. The understand? ing was that when someone came along who realized the bow was for them, or when they reached a certain age when they real? ized that they were the one for whom that was intended, they would take it and use it for the proper purposes. It turned out, Ronald MacLellan at a certain age, it just struck him that that bow was for him. He took it down, he went out to the barn where they had an old horse with a white tail and mane--I think that's great--he un? did hairs from the tail of the horse. He strung up the bow, and that was the bow he used as a young man. And apparently he was a wizard all the while that he played, whether that's coincidental or not. When I asked members of the family whatever hap? pened to the bow--I figured you could pass that on to somebody else--they just claimed it disappeared and they had no i- dea where. They realized that there was a fiddle in existence somewhere, but this bow had disappeared. This sort of parallels the story I had a- bout Donald Campbell, who died in 1878, from the St. Peters area. He had, from two (35)