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yet located it. But I think probably his first winter in the new land was what really convinced him that it was the wrong move to have come here. I think he arrived just before the winter set in. And he talks about the land of withered grass and cold and imprisoned--you know, it was this lack of freedom, that he couldn't roam the mountains as he used to-- this got to him. And then he described the village, or what would have been the village--the Drochaid--Bridge--at that time. And it's a very unflattering picture. (Of what would have been Mabou?) Yes, what would have been the nucleus of the village then. He talks about the stores. And obviously the stores in those days were, you know, they were saloons and they were stores and they were meeting places. And his picture is one of filthy, muddy floors and people drinking and fighting--a very unpleasant place to go to. But then again, you see, his cousin Allan retorts, and he says that this is not so. So who do you believe? I think John the Hunter was elitist and rather snobbish from his background. And he also refused to accept the new land. I think he just deliberately said no to it. But I don't think we can deny the description that he's left us. I'm sure in the 1830s in the early days that there were scenes like he describes in his poetry. That maybe it wasn't such a very pleasant place to live in. (But Allan the Ridge argued for the place.) Argued for it with a much more healthy attitude. Enthusiasm and optimism. (And yet Alan's the one who did not stay.) True, true. They moved on to Antigonish County, certainly. And the Hunter died here. And I have read a note that he's buried in Mabou, but we haven't located his grave. (We feel that Allan came here as a poet. I take it his life was taken up in doing what a pioneer does in a new place.) Exactly. (Did he find time also to be a poet?) Oh, indeed he did, yes. In Scotland, I believe he was a shepherd. That was partly his trade. In Mabou he would have farmed, he would have kept his wife and children. And he mentions them often in his songs. He was a man's man in many of his songs. You get the drinking songs, you know, he enjoyed the convivial atmosphere. Now this is how he looked upon, maybe, the saloon or the store, as a place where men got together, exchanged their songs, and had a great time. I think, you know, his life here was spent in providing for his family, and in composing many many songs, in gathering, in visiting or meeting with friends and fellow poets. There is one interesting song--it has no merit in itself--but there were notes that I found to go with it. And I think before I say any more, I have to say that I'm really indebted to Angus Stephen Beaton of Port Hood. He's no longer with us. I never met him. He died before, or just when, I arrived in Cape Breton. But he collected a lot of local songs, wrote them down in scribbles, jotted down songs which probably would have disappeared otherwise, because they are mostly of local interest. And one of the songs included in his collection is called "Janet of the Silver Eye." It's a very short, almost nonsensical song in a way. But the notes that go with it reveal that 4 poets got together, and each one composed a verse. Allan the Ridge was one, his brother was another, and it mentions another two. So that, I think, shows what



was going on in the area at the time. It's a drinking song. I'm sure that they were all together, they were all slightly inebriated, and they--again, this was part of the bardic tradition--tried to outdo each other, who could compose the best verse. And the subject of the song was Al? lan the Ridge's sister-in-law, I believe, who unfortunately had an artificial eye. And this is the silver eye they talk about. And Allan'.s verse is undoubtedly the best. He rather ironically cautions Janet that if she married a drunkard, he will eventually drink her silver eye. (I've been told that a lot of local poetry was composed at the milling board during frolics.) I can't say that what I have seen of Allan the Ridge's verse would be what I would call milling songs. I don't think so. But he often mentions in his songs the occu? pations of the local people. And the one that stands out mostly is music, in all its forms, whether it was dancing, fiddling, piping, singing. This is paramount, you know. The impression that you get from the pictures he paints in his songs--the impres? sion is one of a small, close-knit commun? ity where music was the main form of enter? tainment, a universally loved foinn of enter? tainment. There are many songs which talk a- bout excellent dancers, singers, musicians. So it's a very pleasant picture. CONTINUED
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