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Published by Ronald Caplan on 1986/6/1

Presbyterianism in Old Cape Breton By M. D. Morrison (1940) In no part of Canada have the customs, habits, and practices of the people who occupied the Highlands of Scotland one hundred and fifty years ago been more conserved than by the descendants of those people who emigrated to Cape Breton at the commencement of the 19th century. Not the least interesting of these marked features were the Presbyterian religious observances and ceremonies. A genuine belief in the existence, omniscience, and omnipotence of God; in His providential care of, and personal interest in, the individual--a vivid realization of these theological fundamentals served to chart a course for men and women on the voyage of life that was well calculated to ensure a propitious breeze towards the ultimate destination of all mortals. These ideas found definite expression, first, in the erection of the "family altar" in nearly every house in the community. This meant the gathering of the family, morning and evening, "round the ingle," while the father, and in his absence the mother, conducted family worship. Four or five stanzas of a favorite psalm, transcribed in the Gaelic tongue, were first sung to old mournful Scottish tunes now no longer heard; a chapter from the New Testament was read with grave intonation; and then all knelt while the leader poured out his or her soul in urgent communion with the Invisible Lord of the Universe in whom all lived, moved, and had their being. It was a moment of great solemnity for the young people as, sitting primly on their chairs, they earnestly endeavoured to comprehend the reverential attitude and the holy invocation of the heads of the household. The only exception to the universal observance of formality, while "the Books were being taken," was furnished by the toddling baby who often diabolically persisted, at such times, in the performance of ludicrous antics, thus attracting the attention of the other children, to the immense satisfaction, occasionally, of the latter and to the intense annoyance of the parents. The next significant acknowledgment of their religious belief, to which I would direct attention, was the offering of "Grace before and after meat." This was not the incoherent, galloping mutter that so frequently goes by the name of Grace now at the commencement of a meal; it was rather an address to the Giver of all Good, delivered in a tone of voice and in a spirit of thankfulness that ordinarily was truly worthy of the occasion. I say ordinarily, because instances have been recorded where the Grace was so lengthy that the irresponsibles at the feast entered upon the repast before, the ceremony of thanks had been complete. Then, at the close of the meal, no person retired from the table until Grace was again offered. Thirdly, I would refer to the manner of Sabbath observance. "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy" was an injunction that was heartily accepted by the early Scottish settlers of Cape Breton. So scrupulous were they in this respect that all culinary preparations for the sanctified morrow were adjusted the night before. Thus, all the water required on Sunday, for drinking or other purposes, was stored up on Saturday night; all the food was arranged in the same way, so that little more than its conveyance to the



mouth was permitted or sanctioned; nearly the whole day, apart from attendance on public worship, was spent by the older members of the family in reading the Bible and other religious books, and by the little folk in the study of the Catechism and the singing of hymns. Separated by a considerable distance • 20 or 30 miles • churches were erected in which religious service was held on the Sabbath. The building was, usually, large and commodious, as it had to serve an extensive territory which, though somewhat sparsely settled, yet furnished a quota of church-going people approaching seventy-five per cent. If the weather was favorable, some of these people • those in the remoter sections of the congregation • left home at 8 o'clock in the morning so as to be in church at 11 a.m. They mostly travelled on foot in the summer season, or in Vow boats when living near the water; in winter they permitted themselves to be drawn in sleighs by long-haired horses. Those living nearer the church did not set forth so early as the people farther away; but everybody was within the church precincts about half an hour before the service commenced. By the less thoughtful and the worldly-minded this half-hour was spent, outside the church building, in gossip; but by the "faithful" it was occupied in the vocal exchange of religious experience, in sympathetic expression of condolence with known cases of misfortune and distress; while the ultra-religious immediately sought the sanctity of their pews and there indulged in quiet meditation upon the mysteries of the Christian religion and general theolog-

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