

[Page 43 - The Bagpipe in Cape Breton: From a Conversation with Barry Shears, Piper](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 52](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1989/8/1

write music, a majority of them were ear-players, and they didn't really write the tunes down. A lot of the old players are dead now, and I've had to go to people that either heard them or might have been taught by them. And even those sources are pretty scarce. I am fortunate enough to have a tape of Angus Campbell Beaton who was born in 1895 in the Mabou Coal Mines. Now, he has a unique style of playing, and, to my estimation, is probably one of the best players that ever came out of Cape Breton. He's just a beautiful player, nice balanced instrument, lively music. The tape that I have--and regrettably, there's only 4 or 5 minutes--but that was taped in the late '60s, and this man would have been in his early '70s at that time, 'cause he died in 1971. I also heard a tape of Rory MacKinnon that Helen Creighton made when she was Down North. And while the sound of his instrument is not as good as Angus Campbell Beaton's, he plays dance music. And what I thought were misinterpretations of tunes played by an ear player, I've since done some more research and found out that he was playing some very old styles of tunes that they don't have any more in Scotland. I've gone through some of the older books and I can't find anything that even remotely resembles this. With Jerry Holland's (fiddle) book that just came out, he has a couple of tunes there by Dan Rory MacDougall. And this Rory MacKinnon plays a couple of those tunes on the bagpipe. And it's the same style. And now, you can beat time to the way he plays his reels, and you could stepdance to it. So what he played was actually stepdance music. Now I'm sure there might be other examples of that kicking around. See, pibroch in Scotland was handed down from father to son, down through the generations. The only problem is, if we look at examples in stepdancing and fiddling, what was left over there--I mean, those styles have disappeared completely. So we have to question how authentic their pibroch style is. Maybe at one time there was a purer strain here. And I'm trying to locate any sort of examples of that, even P. Rory MacKinnon written tunes. Maybe some tunes that were composed here. And, if somebody had enough knowledge to write them down, or maybe if somebody could even write down the cantataireachd. Because before written, or staff notation, they used to sing the tunes to each other. And that was called the cantataireachd. And some people in Scotland wrote down the actual syllables for pibroch. And we have professionals over there now going through these written manuscripts, and rewriting them in staff notation to try to bring them to light. The problem with that is interpretation. It's really up to the individual--you know, he might see a comma, and interpret that as a full stop, or just the end of a phrase. And it can get very confusing. (You're saying then that many tunes were kept alive, even by people who perhaps were non-players?) Oh, yes, yes. Peter Morrison, TREAT YOURSELF TO A SEAFOOD SUMMER! Anyway you serve it, Nova Scotia fish and shellfish are delicious and nutritious. IORMAWAY INN SINCE 1926. The first choice for fine food and lodging on the Cabot Trail The Normaway is proud to be able to share a part of Cape Breton's culture. Enjoy traditional music by the fire side, nightly films



on the area, a choice selection of Cape Breton books and records, art and crafts workshop, traditional and contemporary Cape Breton music or theatre most spring and fall weekends, as well as Elder Hostel travel learning programs. For more information write or phone: THE NORMAWAY INN 902-248-2987