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Neil MacNeil and The Highland Heart This is the 100th birth? day of Neil MacNeil. Born in Boston, Feb? ruary 6, 1891, he came as a young child to live with his grand? father in Washabuckl, In Gape Breton's Vic? toria County • the journey that sets the scene and tone for his book Ttie Higtiland Heart in Nova Scotia. He grew up in Washa- buckt, eventually graduating from St. Francis Xavier Univer? sity in Antigonish. While still in Cape Breton, Neil MacNeil became a newspaper- i man. "I was appointed | the Washabuckt cor? respondent for Ttie Victoria News. Week? ly, I gathered local Neil MacNeil (photo by Editta Sherman, NY) personal items and mailed them to the editor; for which I got no pay but the honor and the experience. I shall never forget the thrill of see? ing my first efforts in type. I was also thrilled by the fame and dignity my writing brought me in the community. Perhaps journalism was in my blood; anyway it became my life's work." Neil MacNeil was on the staff of the New York Times Uom 1918 to 1951. He was at different times national editor, foreign editor, city editor and assistant manag? ing editor. In 1951 he received the John O'Hara Cosgrave medal for distinguished service to journalism. Neil MacNeil wrote several books, including: Wittout Fear or Favor (1940), How to be a Newspaperman (1942), An American Peace (1944), and Tales from a Bull Pen (1964). He served American Presi? dent Herbert Hoover, eventually writing (with Harold W. Metz) The Hoover Report, 1953-55. He died in Southampton, New York, on December 30,1969. It is as the author of Ttie Highland Heart in Nova Scotia, first pub? lished in 1948, that most of us remember him today. Controversy is still alive regarding The Highland Heart in Nova Sco? tia. According to his son, Neil Jr., the older generation was outraged and really never forgave Neil MacNeil. His son told us that this reac? tion always baffled his father, especially in the light that the book ap? parently delighted many of the younger generation. That Neil Sr. was aware both of that generational gap, and of what he was up to in writ? ing the book, seems clear in his dedication: "This book is affection? ately dedicated to the memory of my Father, who would have liked it; and of my Grandfather • who certainly wouldn't." 7776 Highland Heart in Nova Scotia is undoubtedly a classic both as a portrait of Cape Breton rural life and as a book of open good humour, daring to re-tell the local stories everyone already knew. It is one of our most important books, worthy of study and debate. Granted, sometimes Neil MacNeil paints with a broad bmsh. He writes: 'The pleasures of the people of Washabuckt were in keeping with the simple, mgged outdoor life that they lived. The men drank their Scotch whiskey straight and at a gulp.... Women liked to visit, to gossip and to pray...Every sort of excuse was employed to have a dance, or a frolic as it was usually called, which often ended in a bat? le royal among the liquored men. A frolic was no place for weaklings and cowards." Possibly Washabuckters took objection to this book, not because they felt it revealed what was private, but because they felt it was in? accurate • that MacNeil's broad portrait did not sufficiently represent the reality they lived each day. Highland Heart should be read in the light of current ideas regarding the creation of a portrait of Cape Bre? ton life that is attractive to tourists. In a recent

manuscript. Dr. Ian MacKay has discussed the powerful thematic thrust of Nova Scotia's selective image for tourist consumption, such as the province's purported Scotch-ness (despite the fact that people of Scottish origin have not been the predominant ethnic group in Nova Scotia's population). Highland Heart seems to fit the agenda of serving up a picture of a safe, pre-modern, moral Cape Breton • which fit in with the tourist pamphlets of its day. The book to some extent contributed to a portrait that belied the complex reality of the world in which, after the tourists went home, Cape Bretoners actually lived. But The Highland Heart in Nova Scotia is a wonderful book. Alongside his broad generalizations are MacNeil's stories of generosity, daily work and extraordinary humour that demonstrate that Washabuck society was vastly more detailed. He is both the outsider and a person who has had the privilege of living inside. No one reading this book can possibly doubt his reverence or respect, how grateful he was for the youth Washabuck gave him. While Highland Heart feeds on romance and nostalgia, it is not the typical tourist's once-over of Cape Breton that so many of our earlier books have been. Neil MacNeil was a visitor who stayed for years, observed, shared and never quite got away. Neil MacNeil's son told us: "He was always an American but he was inordinately proud of being a Nova Scotian." In the school at Washabuck there were three Neil MacNeils in the one-room class. So one was called Neil plus his initial. Then there was Neil Baddeck and Neil Bras d'Or. All his life the author of The Highland Heart in Nova Scotia was proud to be known as Neil Bras d'Or.

Selections from The Highland Heart In Nova Scotia Every man in Washabuck was his own boss, for he got his livelihood from nature and did not have to work for any other man or thank any one but God for it. True, that work was sometimes hard and the living scanty and poor, but such as it was a man was always free to do as he wished and to talk as he pleased. He could take the day off and just loaf if he so desired. He did not have to toady to any one. He could hold his head high; and did.... These simple people lived a wholesome but primitive life close to the soil. Their wants were elementary and necessary and their thinking direct and concise when not confused by their inherited superstitions. They were rough and ready but kindly at heart. They looked for no favors. They would prefer to give rather than receive. They were well-equipped to care for themselves in the world they knew....

The free open life of the country is the ideal life for a boy. He lives close to nature as God intended boys to live. He is one of the crops of the farm along with the hay, the potatoes, and the

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