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There were sceptics even after Caplan's first issue was sold. One person told him: "You'll never find enough material for a second." Some people say the old ways are dying, that Gaelic is dying, that television is making life in Cape Breton just like life elsewhere, and there is truth in all that. But Caplan says those who speak that way are not getting out and talking to people as he does, in little villages by the sea and in the hills and, yes, in the urban, industrial areas where roughly 70 percent of the population of 180,000 live. "They don't talk to me about TV shows," he says. "They have a tradition of taking an interest in one another. They like to sit and tell stories and entertain one another when they visit." He thinks of what he prints not as interviews but as visits. "Visiting is important here. But people don't pay a visit, they make a visit. It's something they work at." The direct, simple titles in the magazine make use of the term, as in "A Visit with Frank and Margaret MacRae." And it was a proud day for Caplan when fisherman Red Dan Smith of Jersey Cove said as he left: "You've made a wonderful visit." Yet, given Caplan's size, his overwhelming presence, it still surprises some people that he can fit comfortably into the visits he makes. But he does. "I'm always offered meals," he says, "a bed, a seat by the fire." Says one folklorist: "Women used to look at him, walking around with his legs too long for his pants, and they'd want to take him home and feed him cookies." He has roamed the island from end to end, slept in his van or car and on many a floor, and he has eaten many cookies. In return, he respects Cape Bretoners' pride and humour. In the beginning, he says, he had one great, if ironic, advantage: he knew so little about island life that everything was new and fresh. He could ask ridiculous questions or expose his ignorance, and nobody minded. "People treated me like a stranger in a new land. I didn't have too many preconceived notions, and when I did, Cape Bretoners were pretty quick to correct them. But they did it in a way that makes you comfortable, and they're proud of that." Caplan sees no end in sight. In fact, his best answer to doubters came in January 1989 when he published his 50th issue, a special one that saluted its predecessors by cataloguing past articles by various categories. He publishes about 80 percent of the stories in English. The rest are in French, Gaelic or Micmac. They range from tales rooted in the folklore of Highland Scots and Acadian French to stories about modern industry and developments: "The Pulp Mill Comes to the Strait," "How We Got the Canso Causeway." When Caplan heard that former employees of General Instruments were to have a reunion, he asked if he could attend. Then he arranged to talk later with five of the people about the controversial American subsidiary that received government grants, ran a Sydney factory from 1967 to 1974, then left. One of those interviewed, Isobel Cooper, talks in one issue of becoming a union representative at the factory. She says that even though the pay was low and the work boring, one good thing came out of the union's existence: it was a great confidence builder for relatively uneducated women who discovered that they could do something. It gave them the incentive to go hunting for other work. The trouble, says Cooper, is that only about 10



percent of them could find any in Cape Breton. The way such stories appear indicates the way Caplan works. His name is hard to find in any given issue; so is a date. He numbers each issue. Put a date on the cover, he says, and people may eventually say it is old and throw it out. Instead, many collect them. In edition, he keeps his comments, in brackets, to an absolute minimum. What matter is the story itself. Sometimes they come easily, sometimes Caplan spends days, even weeks, before he gets what he wants. Dr. Robert Morgan, archivist of the Beaton Institute, says the two of them gnawed away for a year, off and on, at an idea Caplan had: to get Morgan to talk for a popular audience about subjects he had written about in academic journals. It finally worked out so well that it would be difficult to say which of the two was happier with the result. WJ'