Silence, Absence, and Forgetting: Traditional Music and Dance Contests of Gaelic Cape Breton

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Abstract: A documented history of cultural competitions and contests in Gaelic Cape Breton is being deliberately forgotten. Drawing on Paul Connerton's theory of social forgetting, the author suggests that this has happened for ideological reasons involving the construction of Gaelic culture as participatory and inclusive, characteristics that many Cape Bretoners find irreconcilable with competitions. By examining historical evidence demonstrating that cultural contests and competitions existed in Cape Breton at various times and in various places, and how they relate to a broader, international context of competitions in "Celtic" cultural communities, the author concludes that present-day claims about the absence and insignificance of contests are inconsistent with the historical record.

Résumé : L'histoire documentée des concours et tournois culturels gaéliques au Cap Breton est délibérément oubliée. À partir de la théorie de Paul Connerton sur l'oubli social, l'auteure suggère que cela s'est produit pour des raisons idéologiques, entre autres en raison d'une conception de la culture gaélique vue comme participative et inclusive, caractéristiques que de nombreux Capbretonnais estiment inconciliables avec les concours. En examinant les données historiques qui montrent que les concours et tournois culturels existaient au Cap-Breton à différentes époques et en divers lieux, et la façon dont ils se reliaient à un contexte plus large de compétitions internationales des communautés culturelles « celtiques », l'auteure conclut que les déclarations actuelles au sujet de l'absence et de l'insignifiance des concours ne concordent pas avec ce qu'attestent les documents historiques.

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That the English language doesn't have an opposite for *memory* really intrigues me. Let's consider that for a moment. It's filled with binary opposites: presence/absence, adult/child, life/death, day/night. These words are all nouns, just as "memory" is a noun. Yet there is no antonym for memory. Thesaurus.com offers forgetfulness, ignorance, and amnesia; none of which is exactly right. Memory's associated verb is "to remember" and there is an opposite verb: "to forget." But in seeking an opposite for "memory" as a noun, the best we can do is to use "forgetting," the verbal noun and a decidedly clunky option. It is as though the act of "forgetting" is encoded into the very fabric of the English language. Instead of an antonym for "memory," there is only an absence, a silence — just as the opposite of memory means the absence of memory, a gap in memory. Because the world has been and is so often organized around binaries, this lack of a binary is significant. Studies of traditional culture are also often organized around binaries: oral/literate, old/new, instrumental/vocal, local/global, and so on. Likewise, the concept of memory is central in many studies of traditional culture. So what does it mean when memory's opposite — forgetting — has no place within an epistemology shaped by binaries? How can we conceive the existence of "not-memory" in traditional culture, let alone study it?

I've long been interested in traditional cultural competitions in Gaelic Cape Breton[1] — or more accurately, their absence (Sparling 2011). But it's not quite correct to talk of their absence either. As I will show, fiddle, dance, and Gaelic song competitions in Cape Breton have well-documented histories. The earliest reference I can find to such cultural competitions in Cape Breton is 1891, although it is likely such competitions existed before. However, most ceased by the mid-twentieth century. Why did they stop being held, particularly given that music and dance competitions have continued to play an important role in cultural maintenance in other "Celtic"[2] countries, as well as in diasporic and affiliated communities throughout North America?[3]

I became fascinated by the complete absence of any references to competitions when I began conducting fieldwork in Cape Breton in the late 1990s.[4] When I asked people about them, they generally disavowed competitions entirely, claiming, or at least implying, there had never been a history of competitions in Cape Breton. This understanding of Gaelic Nova Scotia being non-competitive now permeates published histories and scholarship. Take, for example, Marie Thompson's article about the influential 1971 CBC documentary, *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, in which she states definitively, "Fiddle competitions were *never* part of the Cape Breton music scene" (2006: 9; emphasis added). Glenn Graham, a respected fiddler and author of a book about fiddling in Cape Breton, wrote, "Fiddling competitions

were never prominent and [are] now virtually extinct in Cape Breton" (2006: 35). Clearly, not only did competitions stop, but previous examples were also minimized or stopped being acknowledged altogether. Why? How?

In this article, I argue that a documented history of cultural competitions and contests in Gaelic Cape Breton is being deliberately forgotten. Drawing on Paul Connerton's theory of social forgetting (2008), I suggest that this has happened for ideological reasons involving the construction of Gaelic culture as participatory and inclusive, characteristics that many Cape Bretoners find irreconcilable with competitions. By looking at historical evidence clearly demonstrating that cultural contests and competitions existed in Cape Breton at various times and in various places, and at how they relate to a broader, international context of competitions in "Celtic" cultural communities, we can see that present-day claims about the absence and insignificance of contests are inconsistent with the historical record. This inconsistency reveals that a process of deliberate, if tacit, social forgetting frames the present-day community's efforts to assert agency over its own definition. After presenting evidence of the historical existence of fiddle, dance, and Gaelic song contests and their social repudiation, I turn to Paul Connerton to consider how and why the deliberate "forgetting" of contests is happening in Cape Breton Gaelic culture.

Fiddle, Dance, and Gaelic Song Competitions in Cape Breton

When tens of thousands of Gaelic-speaking immigrants from Scotland settled in the eastern regions of Nova Scotia and across Cape Breton Island from about 1775 to 1840, they settled in tight-knit communities through chain migration. Gaelic became the majority language of the island's settler population (see Fig. 1). At the time of Canada's Confederation in 1867, Scottish Gaelic was the third most spoken non-Indigenous language in Canada, after English and French. In 1901, Canada was home to approximately ninety thousand Gaelic-speakers, fifty thousand of whom lived in Nova Scotia (Dembling 2006). The number of Gaelic speakers in Canada is all the more remarkable when compared with the number of monolingual and bilingual Gaelic speakers in Scotland at the time: 230,806 (MacAulay 1992: 141). In other words, a number equal to almost 40 percent of Scotland's Gaelic-speaking population lived in Canada at the turn of the century. Although the language has declined quickly since, the Gaels' musical and dance traditions have flourished, particularly their fiddling, piping, and step dancing.[5]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were numerous fiddling, piping, step dancing, and Gaelic singing contests in Cape Breton. Many Cape

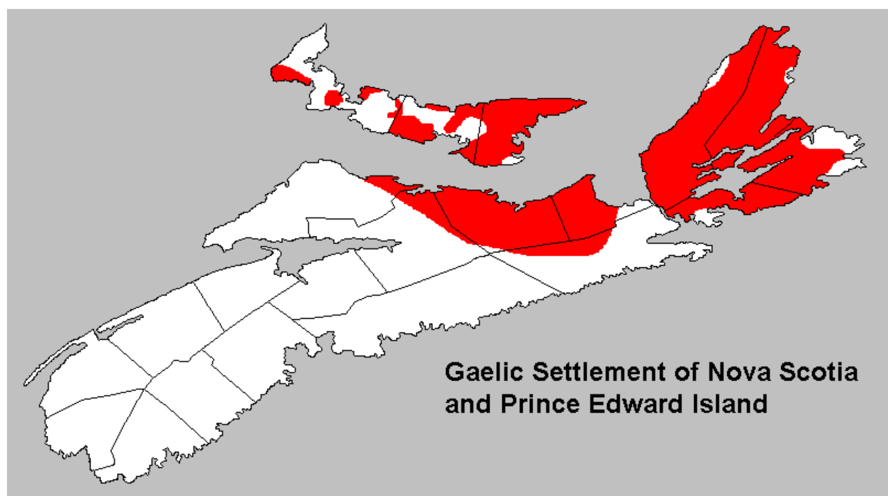

Fig. 1. Gaelic settlement of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Courtesy of Kennedy (2001: 27).

Bretoners competed in contests off-island as well. Alister MacGillivray's books of edited interviews with fiddlers, *Cape Breton Fiddler* (1981), and with step dancers and pianists, *Cape Breton Ceilidh* (1988), name a number of contests (see Fig. 2):

1891: Glendale (MacGillivray 1981: 28)
1925: Inverness (MacGillivray 1981: 30)
1925: Sydney (MacGillivray 1981: 55)
1926: North Sydney (MacGillivray 1981, 18: 45)
1926: Sydney (MacGillivray 1981: 47)
1927: Judique (MacGillivray 1981: 29)
1928: Sydney (MacGillivray 1981: 60)
1930: Judique (MacGillivray 1981: 61)
1932: Glace Bay (MacGillivray 1981: 19)
1932 or 1933: Port Hood (MacGillivray 1981: 138–39)
1935: Sydney (MacGillivray 1988: 185)
1938: St. Ann's Gaelic College Mod (held annually until 1999)
(MacGillivray 1981: 110)
1941: Johnstown (MacGillivray 1981: 109)

This list is incomplete because it depends on people's memories, the particular individuals interviewed, the questions asked, and editorial decisions. But it

gives a clear sense of just how common island fiddling contests were. They were held across the island, in both urban and rural communities.[6]

A number of people in MacGillivray's books also mentioned contests, without dating them. Some were held in the same communities listed above (we cannot be sure if the contests mentioned were held in the same years as those listed above since many communities hosted several) as well as in additional communities (see Fig. 2):

East Bay
Sydney Mines
Irish Cove
West Bay Road
Lower River

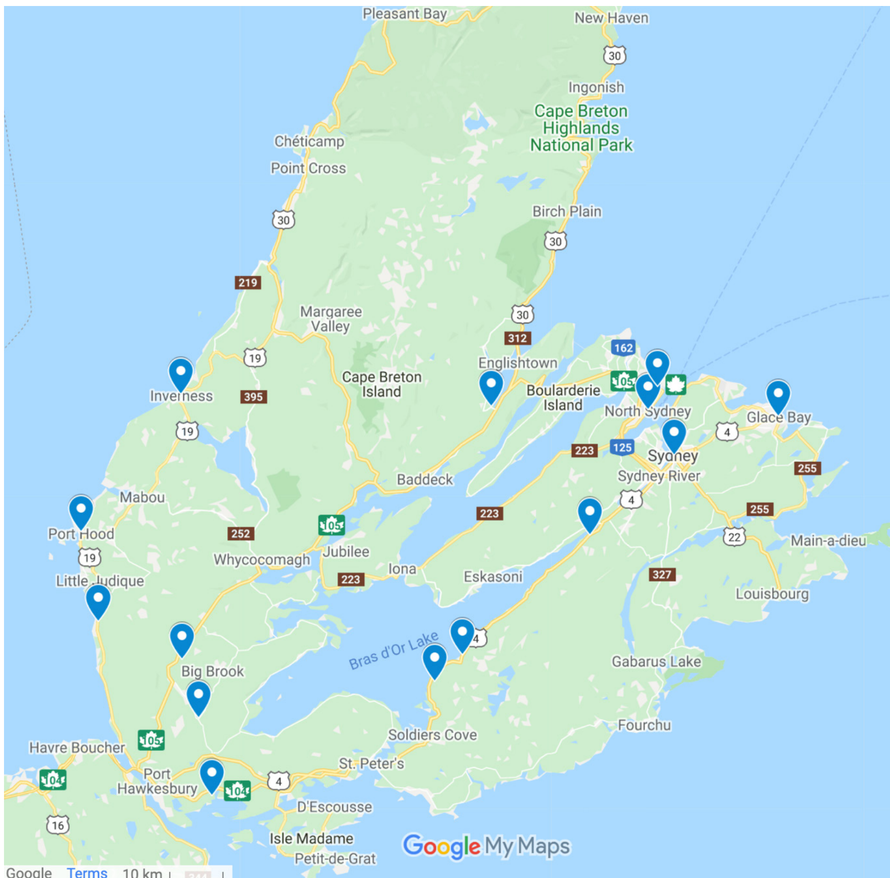

Fig. 2. Sites of fiddle and step dance contests mentioned in *Cape Breton Fiddler* and *Cape Breton Ceilidh*. Map by Google Maps, published in accordance with its "Uses in Print" guidelines.

The research of Cape Breton piping and step dance scholar John Gibson suggests that a number of these contests were likely sponsored by the Scottish Catholic Society of Canada (SCSC), founded in Iona, Cape Breton, in 1919.[7] Despite the society's name, which suggests a national scope, it was exclusive to the Antigonish diocese, which incorporates eastern mainland Nova Scotia and all of Cape Breton Island (i.e., the areas of greatest Gaelic settlement). Indeed, all of the contest sites listed above are in predominantly Catholic communities. One exception is the annual mod at the Gaelic College, a competition not organized by the SCSC, which is in a predominantly Protestant community The SCSC's mandate was to educate youth to live improved rural, scientific, and agricultural lives and to support Gaelic culture and language as a tool "to retain young, socially coherent rural populations" (Gibson 2017: 96). The SCSC borrowed ideas from Scotland, including the creation of contests, especially Highland games and mods, and it happily included Highland dancing alongside more traditional and local forms of fiddling, piping, and step dancing at its meetings and events.[8] The SCSC consisted of fifteen councils spread throughout the diocese. Its annual "national convention" was held in a different community each year, often accompanied by a contest. At the 1925 convention in Boisdale, for example, a motion was carried to initiate a mod — a regularly occurring cultural competition focusing on Gaelic song and Scottish traditional music and dancediscussed further below). In 1926, the SCSC's records document that the creation of an annual mod in New Waterford was something "to be looked forward to eagerly every year" (quoted in Gibson 2017: 314n97). A mod was held as part of the national convention in Judique in 1928, and Highland games were held as part of the national convention in Inverness town in 1929. Records show that a council competition in Sydney in 1928 was its sixth annual contest (Gibson 2017: 48).[9]

Several qualities of the SCSC contests bear mentioning, and I will discuss their significance below. First, the SCSC and its activities were run by local people. Granted, organizers were priests and educated laypeople, not the uneducated underclass. But they were people deeply familiar with, and connected to, local communities, practices, values, and traditions. This is noteworthy because many of the reasons that contests and competitions are refuted today are because they are deemed to have been the creation of outsiders and were, apparently, never truly embraced by locals; competitions are therefore not deemed to have existed as an indigenous initiative.[10] Secondly, competitions and contests in Cape Breton never coalesced into an official system of competitions with local contest winners competing in regional or national contests organized by an institution with formal, prescribed standards. Contests in Cape Breton remained largely at the grassroots level. This is again noteworthy by its contrast with formalized

and regulated contests, including Highland games and the Mod in Scotland. The dislike that many local Gaels feel for what they perceive to be the formality and top-down standards of such regimented contests has led them to reject local contests, even though they did not often bear similar qualities. Finally, while there are gaps in the SCSC's records and they don't necessarily record attendance levels or who exactly attended, the SCSC's pervasive use of contests and their repetition in places like Sydney indicate their local popularity.

Whatever the popularity of fiddle, dance, and Gaelic song competitions of the early twentieth century, it quickly waned in the second half. There are few references to cultural contests held during that period. Ian McKinnon documents, for example, that although fiddle contests were staged in Port Hawkesbury in 1979 and 1980, adjudicated by Bill Lamey and Winnie Chafe (both prominent fiddlers at the time), the turnouts were so poor that they were discontinued (1989: 38–39).

It is worth pointing out, however, that when Allister MacGillivray interviewed fiddlers and step dancers for his books (presumably in the 1970s and 1980s, based on the book publication dates of 1981 and 1988), his consultants obviously had no difficulty recalling contests that had happened decades earlier and were quite willing to talk about them. Although most Gaelic cultural contests had stopped by the mid-twentieth century, people still recalled and spoke about them in the 1970s and 1980s. By the time I began conducting fieldwork in Gaelic Cape Breton in the late 1990s, my interlocutors rarely mentioned contests or competitions without being prompted to do so. Even then, I regularly heard that they were never really a part of Nova Scotia Gaelic culture.

Contests in the Broader Context

There seems to have been a shift in attitudes toward competitions between the early and late twentieth century in Gaelic Nova Scotia that led to the contests' decline. Gibson, a piping and step dance scholar originally from Scotland but who has lived in Cape Breton for decades, recently framed SCSC contests as external or elite aberrations within local practice: "The power of Cape Breton Gaelic-speaking priests … was a sine qua non. Traditional music and traditional step dance competitions could be arranged [by priests] that otherwise would have been eschewed to avoid conflict and bad feeling" (2017: 101) and "the Catholic Church's heft alone may have made public competition palatable to those who had the traditional talents [to compete]" (110). He suggests that community members would never have organized or participated in

competitions if they hadn't been organized by priests. Given that priests held significant status and authority at the time, community members would have likely participated in the events they organized, whatever their thoughts about such events. However, as I discuss in more detail below, there were a number of music and dance competitions in Cape Breton that weren't associated with the Catholic Church, and there were many competitions elsewhere that inspired Cape Breton competitions and which likewise did not have a Church affiliation.

Gibson describes the SCSC contests as inspired by "alien-Scottish competitive Mods and Highland Games" (97). The source of these "alien" traditions was Scotland. In the early twentieth century, contests and competitions were being staged throughout the Gaelic speaking and fiddle worlds. In Scotland, An Comunn Gàidhealach (the Gaelic Society) established the first formal national Mod in 1892, modelled on the national Welsh Eisteddfod, which had been running formally since 1860 (although many regional and informal eisteddfodau had been held over earlier centuries) (Davies 1998). Ireland likewise established a national Gaelic festival and contest based on the Welsh model, called Oireachtas na Gaeilge, in 1897 (Costello 2015). The Mod continues to be held annually, a multi-day competitive event and festival that centres on Gaelic language and traditional culture. It regularly attracts national media attention and thousands of competitors.

These large-scale national (and nationalist) competitions inspired spin-offs in diasporic communities. Celtic scholar Michael Newton (2003) has helpfully documented some early North American mods, drawing on the contents of *The Scottish-American Journal*. A Welsh Eisteddfod was held in Scranton, PA in June 1880 (Newton 2003: 92). Only a year after Scotland's National Mod was established, the Scottish Celtic Society of New York held a small Gaelic cultural competition in November 1893, intending it to be an annual event (Newton 2003: 122). In 1897, the Scottish Gaelic Society of New York began holding Gaelic cultural competitions (Newton 2003: 122). Although 1902 is the last year in which there was any mention of the creation of a mod in *The Scottish-American Journal*'s pages, I have explained how the SCSC took up the mod in Cape Breton in the 1920s, and the Gaelic College, founded in 1938 in Cape Breton, began a mod that was held annually until 1999, when it was converted into a non-competitive festival (the Gaelic College Mod is discussed further below).

Meanwhile, fiddle contests proliferated in the North Atlantic during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Henry Ford must be given significant credit for popularizing American fiddle contests in the mid-1920s. Spurred by anti-Semitic sentiments and a dislike of "foreign" dances introduced to the US in the twentieth century (e.g., the tango, Charleston, fox trot),

Ford rediscovered a love of Anglo-American social dances, including contra dancing and square dancing, as well as the fiddle music that accompanied them (Gifford2010). Ford actively promoted square dancing and fiddle music as wholesome American traditions, and his personal widespread popularity ensured that his interests received broad media attention.

The apex of the square dancing and fiddle craze was 1926. It was a year of fiddle contests; hundreds were held across the United States in the early months (Gifford 2010: 329; Perlman 2015: 216). Ford had little to do with any of them directly — contrary to some reports, Ford never sponsored a "national" contest, although he certainly inspired them. The flurry of contests in early 1926 died down by that same summer (Gifford 2010: 332).

The fiddle contest trend could be felt in Canada as well as in the United States. The first fiddle contest in Ontario for which fiddle scholar Sherry Johnson has evidence was advertised in the *Perth Courier* in 1926 (2006b: 106). Fiddle scholar Monique Giroux also traces a Manitoba fiddle contest to 1927 (2013: 194).[11] In early 1926 and after the success of a local fiddle contest, the Intercolonial Club of Boston, whose membership consisted primarily of expatriate Canadian Maritimers, decided to organize an "international" fiddling competition (Hornby 1979: 25). It wound up attracting fiddlers almost entirely from New England, Quebec, and the Maritimes. In Prince Edward Island, an island-wide contest offered the winner an all-expenses paid trip to compete in Boston (Perlman 2015: 214). The Charlottetown contest was a huge success, attracting far more competitors and audiences than anticipated (Hornby 1979: 26).

Hornby notes that the 1926 contest was not the first in PEI. In fact, small, local contests were already quite popular by that time, held in communities all over the island (1979: 26). And although there was not another contest in PEI as big as the one in 1926 in Charlottetown, small and mid-sized contests continued to be held in the decades that followed. As noted above, Scottish Gaelic settlers initially settled both PEI and eastern Nova Scotia (see Fig. 1). Given their geographical proximity and common cultural roots, there was extensive interaction among the communities, including among fiddlers. Evidence suggests that fiddle contests in Cape Breton mirrored the popularity of those in PEI .

In other words, Cape Breton was not isolated from a broader fiddle ethos. Despite stereotypical assertions of Cape Breton's isolation from the wider world, many Cape Bretoners were aware of off-island events and many, of course, participated in them. While 1926 was a banner year for fiddle contests, there is sporadic evidence of both formal and informal fiddle and dance competitions in Canada from the second half of the nineteenth century and

continuing throughout the twentieth (Johnson 2006b: 106). In 1950, the first annual Old-Time Fiddling and Step Dance Contest was held in Dartmouth, near Halifax on the Nova Scotia mainland. Now known as the Maritime Fiddle Festival, it is the oldest continually running fiddle contest in Canada, and it attracted thousands of audience members in its heyday.[12] While most of its fiddle champions have not been Cape Bretoners, a few were, including Lee Cremo and Wilfred Prosper, as well as Tara Lynne Touesnard. In 1951, the first annual fiddle contest in Ontario was established in Shelburne, attracting more than ten thousand competitors, spectators, and staff (Johnson 2006b: 109). During the 1970s and 1980s, it regularly attracted Nova Scotia competitors (113). Ontario fiddle contests may have been modelled on earlier fiddle contests in western Canada.[13] Saskatchewan fiddle contests seemed to reach their height of popularity in the 1960s and 1970s (114), while Manitoba's reached theirs in the 1980s and 1990s (Giroux 2013:195). In 1964, Cape Breton fiddler Winnie Chafe became the first woman to win the International Fiddling Championship in Pembroke, Ontario,[14] and later became the first woman to win the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Association's lifetime achievement award in 2015.[15]

Cape Bretoners regularly left the island in search of jobs. These expatriates maintained contact with friends and family at home, often returning to the island for holidays or to retire. They became members of organizations such as the Intercolonial Club of Boston. They often hired Cape Breton musicians to play at Cape Breton square dances in places like Detroit, Windsor, and Boston. A significant number of Cape Bretoners enlisted in the two world wars, which took them to other parts of Canada and overseas. It was also possible to access American radio stations in Nova Scotia (Bergfeldt-Munro 2015: 15–16). In other words, it is not surprising that there were fiddle and step dance contests in Cape Breton in the early part of the twentieth century, given their popularity elsewhere. In fact, it would be surprising if there weren't.

Given the strong presence of competitions and contests in Scotland and Ireland; in fiddle, piping, dancing, and Gaelic communities throughout North America; and the clear history of fiddle, dancing, and Gaelic competitions inside Gaelic Cape Breton; it is noteworthy that several Cape Bretoners downplay or deny the number and importance of contests in Cape Breton. In 2011, a letter to the editor sparked an extended and passionate debate in the comments section of *WGO Magazine*, an online publication about Cape Breton's arts and entertainment scene. A Highland dancing teacher from Cape Breton's urban region wrote to express concern that the Gaelic College in Cape Breton was cancelling a long-standing annual Highland dance competition. A Highland dancing instructor from Sydney, Kelly MacArthur (2011), wrote, "Under this [new] administration, there will be a change in focus at the College, moving

more towards the Gaelic language and only 'non' competitive studies." One of the most ardent respondents, Daidhidh MF, a young Celtic studies student at St. Francis Xavier University from a Gaelic-speaking Cape Breton family, explained in his response what likely underlay the decision: "Official competition has no part in the cultural heritage of Cape Breton Island" (comment timestamped December 9, 2011, 1:51 p.m.).

Gaelic Song Contests in Cape Breton

The fascinating story of "milling cups"[16] illustrates the presence of Gaelic song contests along with fiddle and dance contests. Whereas fiddle contests outside of Cape Breton Island typically focused exclusively on fiddling (and sometimes the step dancing associated with it), Cape Breton's fiddle culture has strong ties to the Gaelic language. Gaelic song contests can be considered alongside instrumental and dance contests.

In a published travel diary (1990) from his first trip to Cape Breton in 1932, the renowned Gaelic scholar John Lorne Campbell included a section he titled "History of Gaelic Singing Contests in Cape Breton." A prize-winning athlete had donated a trophy to promote Gaelic song and culture. In the diary, Campbell documented the first milling cup competition, which involved teams from three communities from the centre of the island. It was held in November 1931. He noted that the "contest [was] well attended" (13). A second contest was held three months later, on February 11, 1932. Five teams competed. A month later, six teams entered a third contest on March 19, 1932, which was won by Highland hall [hill?]. Campbell noted the competition was witnessed by the "largest crowd that was ever in Iona hall" (13).

I found another reference to a milling contest in a story about milling frolics in *Cape Breton Magazine* (Caplan 1978). Thomas A. MacDonald tells the story:

> There were two or three years that they had an exhibition up in Baddeck. An agricultural representative we had, William Milligan … spoke to me to get a team from the North Shore organised. There was going to be a team from Iona, Washabuckt, 4 or 5 teams. So I got 7 or 8 of us together and we practised…. This was in the late '20s or early '30s.…

But anyhow, that first time, we practised I guess for a whole month and a half. There was a milling board in the old barn I had at Breton Cove. Every evening

the bunch of us would come down and practise different songs. So we had the exhibition. Oh, there was a huge crowd there. There were three judges. . . . So by god the judges awarded the cup to us — we won.

I interviewed Gaelic speaker and tradition bearer Rod C. MacNeil in 2004. His parents had both been members of the Barra Glen milling team. When asked about the milling cups, Rod replied:

> Back in the early '30s there, they used to have milling competitions. And that went down for about, well, perhaps five years anyway, [when] that was quite active. And of course, they'd be practicing their milling at the different houses. And at our home, well, it was once a week that they practiced for some. And [when] this session [contest] was over — maybe 5 or 6 months later they'd be starting all over again. That was how I learned perhaps my first three songs… I was perhaps only 7 or 8 years old then.

One of the judges was Hugh MacKenzie, a respected Gaelic bard from Christmas Island. These contests inspired MacKenzie to write two songs: one about winning the cup ("An Cupan Ùr," or "The New Cup") and one about losing it ("Call a' Chupain," or "Loss of the Cup"). The popularity of the contests, however, gradually declined.

These milling contests are notable for a number of reasons. Perhaps most strikingly, they were created by everyday people. They were certainly not imposed by outsiders, and they were not creations by members of the local educated middle or upper class, as was the case with the SCSC contests. They emerged in the early 1930s, not very long after fiddle and dance contests had reached their peak in popularity. It is likely the milling cup participants were inspired by contests happening in other areas of traditional performance. The proliferation of mods, with their emphasis on Gaelic language and song, must have provided inspiration. But instead of creating a mod, the milling singers created a contest that reflected a distinctly local cultural practice. Although milling frolics are rooted in a Scottish practice, they continue to be practised in Nova Scotia as significant social and cultural events long after they ended in Scotland (Sparling 2019). I cannot imagine a better example of a grassroots initiative rooted in local practices. It is also noteworthy that one of Cape Breton's most well-known Gaelic bards not only served as a judge but was inspired to write songs about winning and losing the cup. An activity's acknowledgement in a Gaelic song composition is a strong indication of its community significance. Finally, Rod C. MacNeil, a deeply respected elder and Gaelic tradition bearer, described the milling cup as successful. He measured its success by the fact that

he himself learned a number of songs from hearing the Barra Glen team, whose members included his parents, practising in his home, and by virtue of the fact that a number of the songs sung at the milling cups remain popular to this day.

The milling cup was a relatively small event, limited in its geographic reach. It ran for about five years and was semi-formal. It was a social event, an excuse to get together with one's neighbours to work on Gaelic songs and, perhaps, to take the opportunity to converse in Gaelic. Based on Rod's comments, no one took it overly seriously. But it also fits within a larger culture of traditional music and dance contests taking place in the early twentieth century.

Gaelic scholar John Shaw (2000), however, argues that although competitions between localities had "long been a feature of singing gatherings [in Ireland and Scotland].... There are no memories recorded [in Cape Breton] of overt competition between singers performing in the same room, or between localities" (26). Shaw sees the milling contests as the exception that proves the rule: "In some areas during the 1930s, owing to influences from the outside, a system of competitions was superimposed on the older practices" (27). Jim Watson, another knowledgeable and respected local Gaelic scholar, likewise saw the milling cup as an anomaly:

> As far as the milling thing goes, where did that happen? Just around the Iona area here. Just a little bit of a thing. The boys got a cup that was donated by a runner from Jubilee. The MacLeod fellow who's a marathon runner, I think. And just for some pastime, they kind of passed it around and so forth. These weren't society-based [contests]. I mean, these weren't cultural Olympic events by any means. (interview)

I return to Watson's comment below, but it's worth turning now to the Gaelic College Mod, in part because it offers another example of a Gaelic cultural contest, but also because of its prominence and because it continued annually until quite recently. Consequently, unlike the situation with other contests and mods, not enough time has passed to allow it to disappear into oblivion. However, every indication is that this is its destiny.

Most of the information available on early instances of the Gaelic College Mod appears within souvenir booklets and its own press releases, making it difficult to ascertain the veracity of details. However, if the Gaelic College's reports are to be believed, the mod was once an exceptionally popular event. What started in 1938 (and later ended in 1999) as a single-day event grew into a seven-day extravaganza by 1953, drawing almost eight thousand attendees and featuring more than seven hundred competitive performances (*Post Record*

1953). In 1950, the Gaelic College announced that six "county mods" were to be held throughout eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton with winners going on to compete at the college's mod (*Post Record* 1950). Unfortunately, there is no information confirming how long the qualifying mods were held, or if they were held at all. Attention was brought, however, to the fact that a number of people came to the mod from the island's urban area (centred in Sydney), significant because, at the time, the limited roadways meant that people from the urban area had to come by boat. In other words, the trip was neither quick nor straightforward. Yet it was popular enough to draw people from some distance away.

There is no question that the Gaelic College Mod, quite unlike Scotland's National Mod, increasingly emphasized Highland dancing and military-style competitive piping over local traditional expressions of fiddling, piping, step dancing, and Gaelic song.[17] While details are sparse, however, it appears clear that Gaelic content, including speeches, an ecumenical church service, and competitions, continued. Competitions, in particular, were overshadowed by more recently imported cultural practices that were brought by instructors from Scotland. Nevertheless, high profile Highland dancing and competitive piping allowed many to dismiss the Gaelic College's activities as oddities, not representative of local Gaelic cultural practices.

I have already noted the response the letter about the decline in competitions at the Gaelic College generated, which declared that such competitions, broadly speaking, were never part of Gaelic culture. We might also consider the comments of a respected Gaelic activist. I call her Peggy to preserve her anonymity. I interviewed her in 1998:

> Sparling: Why did the mod disappear here?
>
> Peggy: Well, there was never a mod here.
>
> Sparling: I thought there was for a while.
>
> Peggy: Well, the only mod that has been going on for years and years is the Gaelic College Mod. But that's never really impacted on anything cultural here. It's very much removed from anything Gaelic culturally — it's never influenced [this place].

Peggy starts by stating categorically that there was never a mod in Nova Scotia. Quite aside from the Gaelic College Mod, there were mods initiated by the SCSC, and possibly others. Only when pressed did she admit the existence

of the Gaelic College Mod, but she quickly dismisses it as existing outside of traditional, local Gaelic culture.

Jim Watson, whom I quoted earlier about the milling cup, likewise saw the Gaelic College Mod as an anomaly, not representative of broader Gaelic culture and society in Nova Scotia:

> The mod was an imported thing. Never really caught on, really. Ah, people turned up for the novelty and so forth. Let's consider that, you know, there were thousands of people speaking Gaelic in the 1950s. And that, how many of them really turned out for this thing, you know? I mean, a few people from around the North Shore? Supposedly they had 300 people there. I mean, it's not like, you know.… [It's significant that other local competitions] weren't society-based. I mean, these weren't cultural Olympic events by any means. And the [Gaelic College] Mod itself, I think, is just about the only thing that was kind of organized with a view towards long-term sustainability and growth and [had] some organizational criteria and regulations behind it. [The competition context in Cape Breton] is quite unlike the situation in Scotland with the development of the Royal Mod. So, you know. I'd prefer to say that as far as the Mod goes, I go back to my earlier comment: this has always been a social culture, not a performance-based culture (interview).

Watson downplays the impact of the Gaelic College's Mod. His estimate of the audience size is incorrect: the mod once attracted thousands of spectators, many coming from further than the immediate environs. More important than his assertion that the Mod was imported from outside local Gaelic traditions and communities, I hear in his comments a concern about the potential impact of formal competitions on traditional practices and values.

Deliberate Forgetting

It is the effort to construct a particular narrative about Gaelic cultural identity and history in Nova Scotia that is at the heart of the silences and denials that serve to mask the presence and history of cultural competitions in Cape Breton. Anthropologist Paul Connerton (2008) argues that forgetting should not always be understood as a failure of memory. He identifies seven types of social forgetting: First, "repressive erasure" is the deliberate and sometimes violent

erasure typically perpetrated by the state. Second, "prescriptive forgetting" is similar to repressive erasure except that it's understood that all parties benefit. Third, "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity." Fourth, "structural amnesia" is remembering that which is socially important. Fifth, "forgetting as annulment" is an excess of information and knowledge that burdens memory, requiring some be discarded. Sixth, "forgetting as planned obsolescence" is forgetting as "an essential ingredient in the operation of the [capitalist] market" (67). Finally, "forgetting as humiliated silence" is collective shame that leads to a desire to forget, marked by collusive silence.

I would modify Connerton's third type as "Forgetting that is constitutive in the *reformation and adaptation* of an *existing* identity." Connerton (2008) starts his discussion of this type of forgetting by suggesting that not all forgetting entails a loss:

> The emphasis here is not so much on the loss entailed in being unable to retain certain things as rather on the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes. Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences. Many small acts of forgetting that these silences enable over time are not random but patterned.... [P]ieces of knowledge that are not passed on come to have a negative significance by allowing other images of identity to come to the fore. They are, so to speak, like pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle that if retained would prevent a new jigsaw puzzle from fitting together properly. What is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects. (63)

He suggests that this kind of forgetting is common to groups and societies that move into new places where they must build new identities and new relationships. Gaels began settling Nova Scotia more than two centuries ago; theirs is not a "new" identity. But it is constantly being reformulated within and in response to particular social, cultural, political, and economic exigencies. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Nova Scotia Gaelic speakers had internalized a negative attitude towards their language, which marked them, even when speaking in English, as rural, uneducated hicks. It was only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that

Gaelic speakers and their descendants began to value the Gaelic language and culture, seeking now to reclaim and revive them.

Because the concept of memory is so central to studies of culture, heritage, and tradition, I might have drawn on a number of other approaches to memory and forgetting. Music revivals, for example, stand out as being relevant, with their emphasis on reviving "endangered," "forgotten," or "lost" practices. Moreover, revivals typically involve a high degree of selectivity in what is revived; inevitably, various aspects of traditions are left behind (see, for example, Livingston 1999; Bithell and Hill 2014). Revivals, however, emphasize remembering and reviving over forgetting. In the case of Gaelic Cape Breton, music and dance competitions aren't the forgotten detritus left in the wake of a cultural revival effort. The forgetting of Gaelic cultural contests is itself of primary concern in Cape Breton rather than a side effect of an effort to revive a related cultural practice. Moreover, what is forgotten in a revival might be better understood as one of Connerton's other types of forgetting, such as forgetting as structural amnesia, whereby "a person tends to remember only those links in his or her pedigree that are socially important," or forgetting as annulment, which occurs when there is a surfeit of information, causing some to be stored in an archive or similar repository, where it can be "safely" forgotten.

At the same time, music revival literature and theory are undoubtedly relevant, particularly when considering who has been most vocal and explicit in denying the existence or cultural authenticity of contests. In Tamara Livingston's influential article on music revivals (1999), for example, she emphasizes the key role of revival agents in revival movements:

> Revivalists position themselves in opposition to aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in reference to authenticity and historical fidelity. (66)

Once we understand the ideological and cultural conditions that made it possible for the broader Gaelic community to disavow a history of cultural contests in Cape Breton, it could prove productive as a next step to investigate who the most active agents have been in denying a history of cultural contests in Cape Breton.

If "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity" is the type of forgetting that is being enacted in the case of Nova Scotia Gaelic music and dance competitions, then why? What is the "new" identity that is being shaped by these deliberate acts of forgetting? What "old" identity is being

let go? What is the narrative that's being constructed? I think that Watson's comments help a great deal here: "This has always been a social culture, not a performance-based culture." He defines traditional Gaelic culture as participatory (social) rather than presentational (Turino 2008). Watson implies that formal competitions, with carefully rehearsed and staged performances oriented towards judges — in contrast to informal, spontaneous performances in intimate settings oriented towards family and friends — either create the conditions for a shift from participatory to presentational music-making, or indicate a shift already accomplished.

Historian Michael Kennedy (2001) recognizes that local Gaels took part in the Gaelic College Mod but primarily because of the opportunity it offered to learn new repertoire. By setting the mod in opposition to the traditional rural singing tradition, he suggests that both the social and aesthetic aspects of the mod are diametrically opposed to those in the community:

> Respected local Gaelic singers took part in the Mod but refrained from adopting the Mod performance aesthetic.... The Mod and its alien stylings never became popular in Nova Scotia despite the continued support it received from the Gaelic College and from several influential recent immigrants from Scotland, like C. I. N. MacLeod. Although some of the Mod's song collections did find favour among traditional Gaelic singers as a means to learn new material, the singing tradition in rural communities carried on largely as it had done, maintaining the core of its old repertoire and aesthetic. (138–39)

The ways in which music is enacted socially offer one indication of participatory versus presentational qualities, and these differences can be heard as well. For Peggy, the participatory orientation of Gaelic Nova Scotian culture versus the performance orientation of mod culture in Scotland is evident in sonic differences:

> Have you ever been to a Mod?... Well, you go in and they're there, sitting there. There's these guys in kilts adjudicating and you have to be really quiet and the other guys get up, these people get up and there's someone there who gives a key or something on the piano, and the guys start and, you know, there's this "oooo" [*sings high, pure, sound*], and this sound throughout the whole singing. And it was a cultural shock.... It was just so dry and it was just so lacking in any kind of life and spirit.... I guess the wonderful thing

> is — I don't see that influence in Cape Breton. Which I think is good.

For Peggy, competitions in Scotland had transformed the warmth and conviviality of song shared within informal contexts into something so formal that it became dry and lifeless, particularly in comparison with song in Cape Breton's non-competitive contexts. She didn't disparage the singing style that she heard at the Mod simply because she didn't like how it sounded, but because she didn't like what it represented: formal training and a Western-art aesthetic versus informal transmission and a traditional Gaelic aesthetic (see Costello 2019).

For others, the competitive aspects of a contest — leading to the naming of particular people as winners and others as de facto losers — is problematic, potentially leading to bad feelings within and between communities:

> Why put one person up against the other? Why not just take turns about singing and everybody get into it? Why does somebody have to be better and somebody worse and somebody first, second and third and such? I don't go for that. (MacDonald, interview)

> I was in a competition with [Alex Basker] at an exhibition in North Sydney, and I never went in one after that. You see, I beat him out but I figured I shouldn't have. The judges knew me. One was a horse trader, and he could sell *me* a horse but he couldn't sell one to Alex Basker. (Johnny Stamper, qtd in MacGillivray 1988: 157)

In a culture that privileges participation over performance, evaluation and judgment take place informally, socially, and by consensus:

> I don't know if … competition adds very much to the culture. Maybe it does. They certainly make a big deal of it over in Scotland where they have thousands of people at their competitions [mods] and I think a couple of thousand people actually participating. But that doesn't apply here. You know, as far as competition goes, if we had a competition in, say, fiddling around Cape Breton here — [well, let's just say] we don't have to go to a mod to know who the best fiddlers are. The best fiddler may not win the prize, but we know. It's just a consensus, sort of, that so-and-so is the best. Or at least one of the best. (Jamie MacNeil, interview)

It is not that Gaelic culture is non-judgmental, but that judgment is informal and unofficial, thereby creating the possibility for several people to be "the best." No one need be embarrassed by losing to someone else or feel anxious about defending any titles. Moreover, judgment is made by the community — judgment itself is participatory — rather than investing authority in a small number of individuals. Having a small number of named judges raises all sorts of questions about who is authorized to judge musical performances, who is authorized to name judges, what criteria are being used to judge a performance, and whether there are any personal investments by judges that might lead them to evaluate in a certain way. As Irish dance scholar Catherine E. Foley (2013) notes, contests are always comparative in nature whereas informal culture doesn't require comparison (191). People can enjoy several performers without having to weigh them against one another. Jamie MacNeil describes how the general community maintains control of its own standards, refusing the "institutionalization" that formal competitions seem to bring.

Debates and Choices within Irish and Scottish Cultural Competitions

Given the strong connections, relationships, and movements between "Celtic" communities and cultures, and given that Cape Breton's Gaelic College explicitly modelled its mod on Scotland's Royal National Mod, it is worth considering how cultural contests in Ireland and Scotland have fared too. Although many "Celtic" and Gaelic competitions remain popular in Ireland and Scotland, as well as in the diasporas, they have hardly proceeded without controversy and debate. Many Cape Bretoners are well aware of developments and changes to established contests overseas, as Peggy's earlier comments illustrate. Cape Bretoners eliminated contests from their cultural practices when they felt such competitions no longer reflected a desirable identity. Elsewhere, competitions were adjusted to address shifting concerns. These adjustments illustrate alternative possibilities when (or if) a community becomes concerned with the contests' limitations, clarifying the significance of the social forgetting of cultural contests in Cape Breton.

Éamonn Costello (2019), for example, documents how the definition of *sean-nós* (old-style) song changed over time in Ireland's Oireachtas (Ireland's national Gaelic cultural competition). From the time that the term *sean-nós* was first used at the Oireachtas in 1903 until the 1920s, it referred to traditional (i.e., old) Irish-language repertoire. Although little information about early competitors is available, it seems few came from the Gaeltacht (areas where the

Gaelic language is and was spoken as a community language) and that successful competitors performed in a style informed by Western art song. By the 1940s, however, sean-nós came to refer to a vernacular style of singing as much as to a body of repertoire and the Oireachtas made deliberate efforts to attract more competitors from the Gaeltacht. In the 1940s and 1950s, individual competitions tended to be divided by singing style: sean-nós versus Western art-style. In the late 1990s, all Western art-style singing contest categories were removed from the Oireachtas.

In addition, Costello's review of adjudicator reports indicates

> that musical training, inevitably training in a Western-art style, [came to be] seen as contrary to sean-nós, and that adjudicators considered pronounced vibrato to be inappropriate in sean-nós singing because it was an index of formal musical training. The reports illustrate that acquisition through oral-transmission processes, rather than learning from texts, recordings, or singing classes, was seen as the preferred method in sean-nós singing. (176)

Costello demonstrates that adjudicators not only privileged a particular vocal aesthetic, they also rewarded singers who sang repertoire from the regions with which their Gaelic dialect was associated as it signalled singers' awareness of — and engagement in — their own regional culture. It signalled repertoire learned through informal oral transmission rather than formal instruction (whether or not that was, in fact, how repertoire was learned is another question entirely). Although the Oireachtas, as a formal competition, cannot be understood as participatory in Turino's sense of the word (2008), clearly organizers, adjudicators, and participants deliberately adjusted the competition so that repertoire and singing style learned through participatory practices in the community would be rewarded.

Similarly, the Royal National Mod in Scotland's most prestigious solo singing contest was initially the Gold Medal, and it too has privileged a Western art-style of singing. In the face of criticisms that the Gold Medal did not recognize traditional singing styles, An Comunn Gàidhealach (the Gaelic Society), which runs the mod, introduced a Traditional Medal in 1971 (MacLeod 2007). The Traditional Medal, like the sean-nós categories at the Irish Oireachtas, rewards a traditional style of singing and has become increasingly popular over the years. It seems likely that Peggy, who spoke about the polished sound at the Mod she attended, had witnessed the Gold Medal competitions and not the Traditional Medal competitions.

Revisions to Irish dance competitions likewise illustrate changing aesthetics rooted in a shifting definition of traditional repertoire and performance style. Foley (2020) documents changes in An Comisiún le Rincí Gaelcha's (the Irish Dancing Commission's) understanding and framing of traditional solo set dances.[18] The Irish Dancing Commission, the largest international competitive Irish step dance organization, introduced solo set dance competitions in the 1970s in order to reverse the apparent decline of such dances. As with sean-nós songs in the Oireachtas, the "traditional" qualities of solo set dances were initially ascribed to the repertoire and not to their manner of performance. The official way in which solo set dances were taught by the commission to dance teachers, adjudicators and competitors was at odds with the manner in which Foley saw these dances being performed in community. The commission taught the solo set dances in a highly prescriptive manner whereas, in community, the dance tradition was more creative and dynamic. In 2012, the commission changed the rules so that regional variants of the solo set dances could be performed in competition. Given that the rules only changed about 10 years ago, it is perhaps not a surprise that competitors and adjudicators, long trained in a particular competitive dance style, are still struggling to perform or even recognize the "close to the floor" style used to perform solo set dances in community. But clearly, the way in which traditional solo set dances are defined is shifting from one grounded in repertoire to one grounded in dancing style — a style rooted in community participatory practices.

Competitions remain popular among participants because they offer desired benefits. Aside from encouraging participants to learn new repertoire and improve their technique, the Oireachtas and the Mod have created contexts in which one particular song genre highly valued in the Gaelic community, the "big songs" (*òrain mhòra*) — songs with complex rhyme and metre typically written in 8-line verses without a chorus — continue to be performed whereas there are few contexts where such songs are sung today in Cape Breton. Locally published and unpublished Gaelic song collections provide ample evidence that these "big songs" were once common in Nova Scotia, but their lack of a chorus limits their participatory value. Songs with a chorus encourage listeners to sing along between verses, but where a song doesn't have a chorus, there is no opportunity to participate. Competitions have preserved the "big song" repertoire in Scotland whereas they have largely stopped being sung in Nova Scotia, despite having had a strong presence there at one time. Competitors who have learned "big songs" in Scotland then sing them in less formal contexts, whereas Nova Scotia no longer has any common contexts where they can be appropriately sung and appreciated. As the case of "big songs" illustrates, there are both pros and cons to holding competitions, and also to eliminating them.

In short, changes made to competitions in Scotland and Ireland indicate that communities of practice have options when a contest doesn't align with their values. The options chosen — whether those options are made explicitly or implicitly, overtly or quietly — say something about the communities that make them. In Ireland and Scotland, revisions to song and dance contests indicate that a particular performance style — one that indexes traditional Gaelic culture and aesthetics — is privileged. In Cape Breton, the rejection and denial of competitions privilege participatory music-making.

Conclusions

I began this article by asserting that the Cape Breton Gaelic community's deliberate forgetting of cultural contests, despite ample historical evidence that they once flourished, is part of a community effort to exert control over the way in which it is defined. I have cited an array of individual people. But can I assert that these individuals speak for the community, that they are broadly representative of community values and views? There are several indicators that contests and competitions are not currently valued by the Gaelic Cape Breton community. One, of course, is the total absence of fiddling, piping, dancing, and singing contests in Cape Breton despite their continued popularity in Scotland, Ireland, and other "Celtic" North American diasporas. The absence of institutionalized cultural organizations and events is another indicator. Institutionalization and formalization seem to go hand-in-hand with cultural contests, with formal institutions often organizing major competitive events, setting standards, training instructors, and certifying both teachers and adjudicators. In Scotland alone, for example, we find the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association, both the Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing and the Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association, the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, and An Comunn Gàidhealach (the Gaelic Society, which organizes the Royal National Mod). None of Cape Breton's Gaelic cultural practices have corresponding institutions or events, and there is limited engagement with these other and similar institutions. Finally, none of the Gaelic cultural institutions that do exist in Cape Breton themselves offer competitive events. The Cape Breton Fiddlers' Association, for example, formed in 1973 to revitalize the Cape Breton fiddle tradition, which was feared to be endangered at the time, might be one of the more obvious organizations one might expect to organize a regular contest or otherwise encourage competitive fiddling (particularly given the popularity of fiddle contests throughout the rest

of North America), but it does not. Although the Gaelic College once hosted an annual mod, it has not done so since 1999.

Scholarship on traditions tends to focus on memory, change, and the creation of traditions, identifying recalled traditions, methods of transmission, changes to traditions, and the invention of new traditions. UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, to offer one high-profile example, is designed to protect and preserve endangered practices and knowledge, including various cultural traditions. Anh Hua (2005) writes of cultural memory in diasporic communities as a field of contestation: whose memories will be deliberately recalled? What memories are deemed worthy of recollection? "Because cultural memory is political, and because different stories and representations struggle for a place in history, memory is crucial to understanding a culture since it reveals collective desires, needs, self-definitions, and power struggles" (199). Hua, articulating a perspective shared and articulated by many others, emphasizes why memory is important.

But memory is selective; not everything is remembered. Scholars typically study that which has been remembered, that which has been *chosen* to be remembered, as well as how it is remembered, and how it is often remade in the remembering. It is re-membered, re-collected. Remembering is about putting things together anew. But we can also learn much from that which is forgotten and allowed to pass from discourse or active practice. It's just that this can be difficult. How does one investigate silence and absence? It requires finding historical traces documenting presence in the past.

One of the problems of binaristic language is that it tends to be value-laden whereby we tend to map one side to "good" and the other to "bad." In this context, memory is often viewed as positive, and forgetting as negative. As Connerton notes, forgetting is often understood as a failure of memory. Memory is presence, forgetting is absence. If memory is deliberately produced and assists in the creation, recreation, and constant reconstruction of tradition — it is constructive — then a binaristic understanding of forgetting would frame it as destructive, something that dismantles traditions. But we can understand forgetting as a constructive act as well. It is not possible or even desirable to continue all traditions for all time. Traditions have their moments. Communities need to make room for the constant creation of new traditions while maintaining space for those traditions that continue to be relevant to the present. Values, beliefs, and needs shift, and traditions are adjusted accordingly. We need not conceive of forgotten traditions as a failure, but rather as part of a constructive act. 🍁

Notes

1. I have chosen to focus this article on Gaelic Cape Breton rather than on Gaelic Nova Scotia (which includes Cape Breton along with several eastern mainland communities, as noted later in this article) because the fiddle, dance, and Gaelic song contests I'm discussing were, as far as I can tell, exclusively held on Cape Breton Island. Moreover, mainland Nova Scotia (apart from its eastern regions settled by Gaels) has a different fiddle style from that of Cape Breton, one that is more often labelled a down east style and linked to fiddler Don Messer, who enjoyed widespread Canadian popularity as a radio and television personality (see, for example, Rosenberg [1994] and Trew [2002]). There is therefore a cultural division between "Celtic" traditions on the mainland and the Gaelic traditions of Cape Breton Island. Moreover, there is a well-established fiddle competition on the mainland, discussed later in this article, which persists to this day, whereas Gaelic cultural contests have largely disappeared from Cape Breton.

2. Although contentious, *Celtic* can also be a useful term. *Celtic* is usually a term imposed by outsiders as an umbrella term that acknowledges relationships and commonalities among regions and cultures where Celtic languages (Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic, Manx Gaelic, Welsh, Breton, and Cornish) are or have been spoken. However, people who live in such places and who identify with such cultures would typically refer to them by more specific labels (e.g., Cape Breton, Scottish Highlands, Brittany) and would not use the term *Celtic*. For further discussion of the modern evolution of the term *Celtic*, see James (1999).

3. Some of the many scholars writing about competitions in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland include Frank Hall (2008), who has written about competitive Irish dance, Charlotte Davies (1998) about the Welsh eisteddfod, and Simon McKerrell (2005) about competitive piping in Scotland. For studies of competitions and contests in the Celtic diaspora, one need look no further than Chris Goertzen's work on American fiddle competitions (1988, 1996, 2003, 2008, 2012), Sherry Johnson's on the Ottawa Valley fiddle and step dance contest circuit (1999/2000, 2006a), or Monique Giroux's on Métis fiddle contests (2018).

4. I first came to Cape Breton to conduct fieldwork as a graduate student in 1998. Over the following years, I returned to Cape Breton regularly for shorter visits. I then moved to Cape Breton permanently to take on a faculty position at Cape Breton University in Sydney in 2005. I am a reasonably fluent Gaelic learner who is very active in the Gaelic community. I taught community Gaelic language classes for a number of years, I regularly attend Gaelic cultural events, I continue to develop my linguistic and cultural knowledge (primarily through local initiatives), and I have worked with most of the major local Gaelic institutions, both in consultative and in research capacities.

5. See, for example, Gibson (2002), Graham (2006), MacKinnon (2009), McDonald (2013), Doherty (2015), Melin (2015), and Shears (2008).

6. In addition to the contests mentioned in MacGillivray's books, Ian McKinnon (1989) notes that several fiddlers he interviewed for his master's thesis said that they'd competed in contests in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (38).

7. See Gibson (2017) for details, especially chapter 5: The Gaelic Movement in Cape Breton, 1919–46.

8. While there is little clear evidence of the origins of Highland dancing (Scott 2005), Highland dancing as we know it today largely evolved through the competitive Highland games circuit, which has flourished since the nineteenth century (Jarvie 1988). Highland dancing was institutionalized in the 1950s with the creation of the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (SOBHD) and the Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association (SOHDA). Military pipe bands likewise evolved in post-Culloden Scotland as a means of managing previously rebellious Highlanders and repurposing Highland music and symbols (such as the tartan and kilt) for the benefit of the British crown, and likewise flourished from the nineteenth century on. In other words, military pipe bands and Highland dancing largely became popular in Scotland and its diasporas after the bulk of Gaelic settlement in Nova Scotia; Gaelic settlers did not bring these practices with them. Instead, they brought traditions of solo piping and step dancing.

9. It is unclear how often Gaelic singing was included in Cape Breton competitions. It is notable that the SCSC organized Highland games and mods as opposed to fiddle contests. Mods are specifically designed to emphasize Gaelic song and singing so it seems likely that events called "mods" featured Gaelic singing as well as fiddling, piping, and step dancing contests. In other cases, Gaelic singing may have been excluded. Either way, Cape Breton's contests are somewhat different from fiddle contests held elsewhere in Canada, which were typically "stand-alone events" focused on fiddling (Giroux 2013: 195), although they may have included step dancing contests too. Cape Breton contests, by contrast, typically included fiddling, step dancing, and piping, and sometimes Gaelic singing.

10. Thanks to the establishment of the Arichat Seminary in 1853, which moved to Antigonish in 1855 and became St. Francis Xavier University in 1866, built specifically to address the desperate need for priests in the region (MacDonell 1947–48), many Gaelic-speaking priests from Nova Scotia were appointed to predominantly Gaelic-speaking parishes from the late nineteenth century. While the priests may not have always served the parishes of their childhoods, there weren't significant cultural differences between Gaelic parishes, nor great distances between them. Moreover, a number of priests were themselves respected fiddlers and step dancers and, particularly during the twentieth century, were active participants in local cultural events. Father John Angus Rankin (1918–1995), for example, born in Inverness, Cape Breton, and parish priest in Glendale for thirty-five years, was a Gaelic speaker and fiddler who helped to create the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association — which continues to the present — and to organize the first Glendale Festival in 1973, where more than one hundred local fiddlers performed. Several other fiddling and step dancing priests are mentioned in MacGillivray's books, including Fr. Francis Cameron, Fr. Angus Alex

MacDonnell, Fr. Angus Morris, Fr. Eugene Morris, and Fr. Donald Michael Rankin. These priests' cultural interventions can therefore certainly be understood to be informed by a deep understanding of local practices, values, and culture rather than as a top-down or outsider imposition.

11. It is entirely possible and even likely that fiddle contests were being held earlier. Sherry Johnson, for example, has yet to do a thorough review of small, local Ontario newspapers (personal communication). Be that as it may, it is perhaps not a coincidence that the earliest records for Ontario and Manitoba fiddle contests date from around the time of the 1926 boom in fiddle contests across North America.

12. http://www.maritimefiddlefestival.ca/pages/history.htm (accessed January 20, 2022).

13. Giroux cites Fred Claridge, author of *25th Anniversary History of the Canadian National Fiddle Contest, 1951–1975* (1975), who claims that the Shelburne, Ontario, contest was modelled after fiddle contests in western Canada. But Giroux suggests that there may have been more of dialectic relationship between western and central Canadian contests (2013: 199n204).

14. https://tjtracey.com/tribute/details/1352/Winnie-Chafe/obituary.html (accessed January 20, 2022).

15. It is worth noting, however, that none of the fiddlers named in this paragraph are from Cape Breton's predominantly Gaelic communities. Lee Cremo and Wilfred Prosper were Mi'kmaw fiddlers, Tara Lynn Touesnard was Acadian, and Winnie Chafe was born, raised, and formally trained in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Cape Breton's urban area.

16. Milling cups are based on the activity of milling woven wool cloth, which involves a group of people pounding the cloth while singing songs to both keep and pass the time. Milling is necessary to shrink cloth before using it, and to make it more weather-resistant by "fluffing" the fibres. In Scotland, the practice is known as "waulking," although it is known by the same term in Gaelic in both places: *luadh*. For more about milling frolics in Nova Scotia, see Sparling (2019).

17. Although military pipe bands and Highland dancing have become popular across Nova Scotia, historian Michael Kennedy (2001) has documented that the majority of fiddling and step dancing occurs within core Gaelic regions whereas the majority of Highland dancing and piping happens outside of these regions (156–57). By emphasizing Highland dancing and military band piping, the Gaelic College successfully attracted a large attendance from outside the locality, including from the United States and further abroad, but largely did so at the expense of practices rooted in the island's Gaelic communities.

18. The term *set* can mean many things when referring to Celtic dance forms. In this case, it should be understood as "fixed," referring to dances with loosely prescribed choreographies.

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