A NOTE ON CAPE BRETON NICKNAMES

David Frank
University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT

Nicknames are a neglected part of the Canadian vernacular tradition and have received little systematic study. The following discussion reports partial evidence collected by the author in the course of a broader study in the social history of industrial Cape Breton. Although the nickname is often regarded as a rural tradition associated with Gaelic speakers, the findings indicate that the nickname persisted as a part of the oral tradition in the industrial community. Nicknames continued to be drawn from established sources, but the tradition also incorporated references to the conditions and experiences of industrial life among the coal miners. In various cases the nickname offered a compact, often humorous, commentary on the larger social and cultural life of the community. In this way the nickname functioned as a colloquial form of social expression, emphasizing shared values and local identities. For students of language and history the evidence from industrial Cape Breton suggests that there is scope for a more systematic approach to the study of nicknames as a part of the Canadian vernacular tradition.

The nickname has generally been regarded as one of the more colourful aspects of Canadian nomenclature, but this aspect of the vernacular style of expression appears to have received little systematic study in the Canadian context. Colombo's Names and Nicknames, for instance, simply provides a list of proper names and nicknames which have been attached to prominent Canadians.

Some students of the oral tradition, however, have devoted greater attention to the origins and meanings of nicknames, which they have seen as manifestations of the social and cultural environments in which they arise. In his classic study of Scottish culture in rural Cape Breton, Charles W. Dunn provided a brief discussion of the use of identifying names among the Highland Scots of rural Cape Breton. As Dunn pointed out, such local traditions often survived because they were 'universally popular, immediately

understandable, and functionally related to the settlers' way of life' (Dunn 1953: 73, 136-8).

Our understanding of this linguistic tradition can be extended by considering some additional evidence regarding the use of nicknames, particularly in the industrial environment of the island. No concerted effort has been made to collect or catalogue Cape Breton nicknames, and the evidence considered here is fragmentary and impressionistic. The material reported here comes from evidence encountered in the course of a broader study in the social history of industrial Cape Breton and is drawn not only from the observations of previous collectors but also from evidence collected in oral interviews conducted by the author and from research in newspapers and archival sources.

A distinctive tag added to the first name, the nickname conveyed information required to more accurately identify an individual. Given the prevalence of a small range of clan names in rural Cape Breton, the use of patronymics was a common device. In the Gaelic usage which Dunn discusses, the patronymic appeared in the genitive case, though in English both names usually remained in the nominative:

	Son	Father	Identifying Name
Gaelic	Niall	Seumas	Niall Sheumais
English	Neil	James	Neil Jim [or Neil Jim's]

The surname was generally dropped entirely and the individual would, in this case, be known simply as Neil Jim. His wife was thus known as Mrs. Neil Jim and their children as Malcolm Neil Jim and Mary Neil Jim.

The use of the strict patronymic was modified by other conventions which are of particular interest for the student of social and cultural history. As Dunn points out, it also happened that the father-and-son title was eclipsed by family nicknames. While the nickname was a linguistic convention designed to convey essential information, it also functioned as a flexible and innovative element within the oral tradition. Departing from the patronymic formula, the nickname could also reflect other aspects of individual identity and common experience. Such references included allusions to personal characteristics such as appearance, occupation or place of residence. They could also refer to attitudes, events or experiences associated with the individual or the family. Such references would be most meaningful for those familiar with the individual family and the story behind the

identifying name. The nickname could be made particularly memorably if it involved a touch of humour or social comment.

The folklore collector Helen Creighton was also impressed by the persistence of nicknames in rural Cape Breton. Her interview with the educator Alexander Laidlaw, recorded in 1944, provided a number of interesting observations on the tradition (Creighton 1962:71-76). Recalling his own youth in rural Cape Breton, Laidlaw suggested that the most common nicknames referred to an individual's occupation. Among the examples he cited were Angus the Cooper, Alex the Turner, John the Mason, Angus the Miller. Place of residence was another common referent, as were size and appearance; hence Allan the Ridge, Big Sandy, Red Angus, etc. But misdirection was also common and the meaning of nicknames was sometimes opaque to the outsider. For instance, John the Banker was no financier but a fisherman on the Grand Banks. Angus the Nun was a janitor at the local convent. Maggie the Lighthouse was not tall and erect but her father was a caretaker at a government lighthouse. Similarly, individuals named for their size bequeathed names to their children which were confusing except to those familiar with their lineage: Big John's children, Alex Big John and Katie Big John, might bear more resemblance to their mother, who was small in stature (and known as Mrs. Big John).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries rural society was strongly affected by emigration, particularly to the coal and steel districts of the island. When they left the countryside Cape Bretoners did not abandon the habits of speech and thought embedded in the oral tradition. Like people in other times and other places, they drew upon their existing culture to attach meaning to the new environment, and this theme has appeared prominently in the recent social history of industrial Cape Breton (Muise 1980; Macgillivray 1983; Frank 1985). The nickname became an accepted part of the new industrial culture. The persistence of nicknames in the mining community was recalled in the following comments by two coal miners, both in their 80s, recorded in 1975:

> Joseph Nearing: Once you got that name it followed with the old people. I don't know about the young people today, but everybody had a nickname in Reserve in the olden days.
>
> Angus F. MacDonald: Everybody.
>
> Nearing: Everybody had a nickname.

> MacDonald: The same here, everybody. You take this, there is a lot of Angus MacDonalds round here, you know what I mean, and I guess if I didn't have an F in my name they would have some nickname on me. One fellow called Long Angus, another fellow called Pretty Angus, you know what I mean. Another fellow Long John or Short John, No Hair John and Bald Headed John and Whiskery John, you know what I mean. That is the way you knew them, yeah. The same was in the Gaelic -- I have Gaelic you know-- if you call a man you would call him by his old name, his father's name and even his grandfather's name.

The recruitment of population for the industrial areas drew heavily, though not exclusively, on the rural parts of Cape Breton Island, and as a result the most common cultural background among the coal miners was one of Scottish Highland origins. A small district readily furnished several John MacLeods, Sandy MacDonalds or Mary McNeils, and this demographic factor certainly contributed to the persistence of nicknames in the industrial environment. One long verse, devoted entirely to Mary McNeils and John MacDonalds, appeared in print in the Cape Breton Mirror in 1953:

> Is it Tall John or Black John or Johnny Red Neil?
> Or Johnny the Lady or Johnnny Cornmeal?
> Or perhaps you'd be looking for Johnny Big Blow,
> Or the fellow they sometimes called Johnny the Crow?
>
> By this time I guess that you surely must see
> There are lots of MacDonalds in little C.B.
> Then you'd say quite politely, 'I'd like for to know
> Where's that Mary McNeil that I knew long ago?'
>
> You may be surprised if the answer will be,
> Is it Mary Tall Angus or Mary John D.,
> Or Mary the Widow, or Mary John More,
> Or Mary Big Duncan that lives by the shore?

Similarly, another rhyming recitation of nicknames, composed in the 1920s in Sydney Mines by Michael Dwyer, illustrated the broad scope as well as the persistence of the tradition (McCawley 1929:62-64):

> Hungry Malcolm has enough to eat,
> Raspberry Vinegar was old and sweet,
> Alan the Fiddler and Slim Jim,

Lazy Hector and Coal Black Tim;
Jim Butcher looks slick dressed up in hi beaver,
Angus the Wrestler and George Weaver,
Danny Bara has only one tone,
Jimmy Bottomer and Poor Cheap Joe;
Old Crunch used to speak so odd,
Jack Scotch and Minnie Maud,
William Tell, no one could harm her,
Mick Boisdale, the Caraway Farmer.

In the almost cryptic references to local characters there was hidden meaning and humour, and the nickname may be seen as a key to a fund of anecdotal knowledge embedded in local traditions. At the same time the presentation of nicknames in verse form in these examples implies that there was a recognition that the tradition was an entertaining, even decorative, part of local tradition worthy of preservation.

In the coal towns the nickname readily incorporated references to the new situation and new kinds of experiences. Paymasters recorded nicknames on the payroll in order to distinguish the various Macdonalds, MacNeils and MacLeods, and the less familiar names of Ukrainian, Italian or Lithuanian immigrants were sometimes replaced by anglicized surnames or nicknames. Green hands from the countryside were often known as Bucks, and thus Johnny the Buck, a McIntyre and well known ballplayer, carried the name from the days his father first arrived to work in the mines. Dannie Narrow Gauge was a MacDonald who operated a long, narrow, three-storey boarding house for the coal miners. Among the coal mining MacDonalds there were numerous Sandy MacDonalds, hence Alex the Weighman (for his occupation), Little Sandy (for his size), Sandy Cape North (for his home) and Black Sandy (for his whiskers). In one pit there were several Jack MacLeans: Jack Sandy's was known by his patronymic, but Jack the Bottomer handled loaded tubs at the bottom of the shaft and Jack the Face worked at the face of the coal seam. Burnt Rory earned his nickname when a premature shot was fired in the mine and left him with a powder-burned face; the family were subsequently known as the Burnt Rorys. When a miner received a cut in the pit, it was the custom to rub some slack coal on the wound to stop the blood. The sulphur in the coal had an antiseptic effect, but when the wound healed a blue scar remained. The Blue Ranalds earned their tag in this fashion, and in later generations the nickname Blue tended to eclipse the surname MacDonald entirely. The brother of Maurice Blue, however, Lewis MacDonald, gained his personal nickname, Kid Burns, because his boxing style resembled that of his hero, Tommy Burns, the Canadian who held the world heavyweight title in 1906-8.

Stuart McCawley, a Glace Bay journalist and collector, documented local nicknames and their associated stories during the 1920s and 1930s, and much of this material was presented in local collections and in his personal scrapbook, later acquired by the Miners' Memorial Museum in Glace Bay. McCawley readily appreciated the ways in which the nicknames could convey some of the common experiences of the industrial community. No anecdote better dramatized the transition from rural to industrial environment than the story of one Sandy MacDonald's nickname. Looking for work, Sandy MacDonald stepped into a colliery office, chewing and spitting tobacco and scuffling his feet. The paymaster felt his mode of approach lacked sufficient deference and demanded:

> 'Remove your hat!'
> Sandy ignored the request, and the paymaster, getting hot under the collar, stamped his foot, and looking Sandy squarely in the eyes, said 'Didn't you hear me tell you to remove your hat?'
> 'What hat?' said Sandy.
> 'The one on your head,' said the paymaster.
> 'Her is not a hat,' said Sandy. 'Her's a cap; and Mister Smarty, the head that took her in here can took her out.'

McCawley's rendition captured the rural Cape Bretoner's habits of speech as well as the lack of deference which was often characteristic of early industrial culture. The paymaster afterwards enjoyed repeating the story but also had his revenge: 'And to get even,' McCawley reports, 'he put Sandy on the payroll as "Sandy Took Her MacDonald"' (McCawley 1966:23).

In another incident widely repeated in the industrial community to this day, the story of yet another Sandy MacDonald reflected some of the less humorous tensions involved in the transition to an industrial way of life. This coal miner walked a long distance to the colliery office to collect his pay one day. When he opened it, he found there were so many deductions listed on the paysheet that he received only two cents in cash -- two large black Victorian pennies. 'Did you have a good pay?' he was asked. 'Well yes, I had a very big pay.' The practice of deductions and the shortage of cash among the coal miners, many of whom lived in company houses and depended on goods from company stores, was a widespread grievance among the coal miners. As the story circulated, he became known as Sandy Big Pay, and his sons were the Big Pay MacDonalds (Nearing and MacDonald 1975).

Nicknames were also applied to the more prominent figures in the mining community, and often clearly signified approval or

disapproval. Hiram Donkin, general manager of Dominion Coal in the 1890s, was a massive man with black hair and a full beard; he was known as Black Donkin. A later company official, a big man with a reputation as a despot, was known as Sandy the Bear. In the 1920s the humour of the oral tradition was turned against the unpopular president of the British Empire Steel Corporation, and one miner's wife observed bitterly in a letter to the Maritime Labor Herald: 'Roy Wolvin -- better known to me as "Wolf" -- how came your mother to name you so well?' In adopting this device, the coal miners were making an effort to give the face of their employers a more recognizable shape, even as the corporations became increasingly large and distant forces in the local economy. The complexities of the local political economy could be sharply summarized in a single sobriquet popularized in verses such as those by the worker-poet Dawn Fraser originally published in the 1920s (Fraser 1978:51).

> Now of all the bosses that e'er were cursed,
> Roy the Wolf was called the worst,
> He was the leading parasite
> That fed on the workers day and night;
> Greedy, growling wolf for more,
> He stole the bread from the workers' door ...

In some ways, then, the tradition of the nickname bridged the gulf between rural and industrial environments. As new circumstances warranted, older references were replaced by new ones. The nickname continued to be an innovative tradition, related to the experience of successive generations. In conveying information, the nickname also preserved the memory of anecdotes and events, conveyed attitudes and offered standards of judgement. Often the nickname was functionally related to the way of life of the individual, family, community or class. Neighborhood and kinship ties remained strong in the coal towns, but the nickname attempted to extend this spirit of shared identity to a much larger community among the industrial population. By its familiar, colloquial nature, the nickname implied that the community was compact and closeknit, and that individuals could be known by their family and personal history. Conflicts and loyalties were personified in ways that underlined the primacy of individual experience and personal responsibility. At times it appeared almost as a ritual maintained primarily for its residual humorous appeal. In other cases the nickname appeared as a form of social control or social protest, expressing expectations or sanctions associated with the tensions of industrial society.

It is difficult to make generalizations, however, for this is an area which deserves systematic inquiry and there remain many opportunities for research. It is not clear, for instance, to

what extent nicknames entered into the official culture of written government records, particularly in legal documents, where efforts to trace individuals can be confounded by the absence of the familiar nicknames by which individuals were generally known. Neil MacNeil has observed that nicknames rarely entered the realm of official culture in rural Cape Breton (MacNeil 1971:18-20). In another context, for instance, the suppression of nicknames among the Normandy peasantry in the 19th century has received attention as an indication of the growing authority of the nation-state (Hobsbawm 1975:226). Some social historians have seen naming practices as indicators both of cultural domination and subordination and of collective solidarity and resistance, themes which have loomed large in debates on the social history of slavery (Genovese 1974:444-50; Gutman 1976:230-56). The approach suggests that nomenclature may be helpful in understanding the resistance to bureaucratic authority among the lower classes and more remote territories of Canadian society. Consider, for instance, the example cited by Anselme Chiasson in his study of Chéticamp, where one Hubert Poirier failed repeatedly to respond to the roll call when Acadians were called out for military exercises. To be understood the interpreter for the British officers had to call out the more familiar name, Petit Singe. As this example also reminds us, nicknames were not an exclusively Scottish tradition, and there is ample scope for exploring the use of nicknames among other groups such as the Acadians (Chiasson 1986:235-7). The use of derogatory ethnic nicknames has been explored at some length in the American context (Allen 1983). Interestingly, however, little evidence was encountered of the use of nicknames in Cape Breton as reflections of ethnic tensions. It may be that nicknames drawn from the new industrial culture functioned more in the cause of solidarity than division within the industrial community and formed one of the ingredients in the development of new local or regional identity. Again, this is a theme which requires investigation, and perhaps we should conclude only that in some of its manifestations this aspect of the oral tradition seems to promise insights into the special features of local culture and identity in the industrial community.

All this is simply to suggest that investigations of habits of speech and uses of language need not be restricted to technical studies of variations in the use of language. Certainly there has been a growing interest in the social and historical origins of linguistic traditions in Canada, an interest symbolized most impressively by the Dictionary of Newfoundland English (Byrne 1983; Poteet 1987). From the perspective of cultural history, major social changes should be traceable in the commonplace transactions of language. One of the preoccupations of social historians in recent years has been the effort to identify the neglected sources

of local and regional identity in Canada. The search for Canadian culture has often been conducted at the level of national traditions, but it may be that some of our most vigorous cultural traditions are rooted in local identities and embodies in the everyday uses of language. The study of nicknames offers a case in point, and there may be opportunities here for greater collaboration between students of language and history.

REFERENCES

ALLEN, Irving Lewis. 1983. The Language of Ethnic Conflict: Social Organization and Lexical Culture. New York: Columbia University Press.

BYRNE, Cyril. 1983. 'The vernacular tradition in Atlantic Canada.' Acadiensis XIII. 1:142-149.

CHIASSON, Anselme. 1986 [1961]. Chéticamp: History and Acadian Traditions. St. John's: Breakwater Books.

COLOMBO, John Robert. 1979. Colombo's Names and Nicknames. Toronto: NC Press.

CREIGHTON, Helen. 1962. 'Cape Breton nicknames and tales.' In H.P. Beck (ed.), Folklore in Action, 71-76. Philadelphia.

DUNN, Charles W. 1953. Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia. Toronto.

FRANK, David. 1985. 'Tradition and culture in the Cape Breton mining community in the early twentieth century.' In Ken Donovan (ed.), Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985, 203-218. Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press.

FRASER, Dawn. 1978. Echoes from Labor's War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s. Toronto: New Hogtown Press.

GENOVESE, Eugene. 1974. Roll Jordan Roll: The World of Slaves Made. New York: Pantheon Books.

GUTMAN, Herbert B. 1976. The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom. New York: Pantheon Books.

HOBSBAWM, E.J. 1975. The Age of Capital. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

MCCAWLEY, Stuart (ed.). 1929. A Book of Songs and 'Come-All-Ye' of Cape Breton and Newfoundland. Glace Bay: Brodie Printing Service.

---------- (ed.). 1966. Cape Breton Come-All-Ye: A Book of Songs and Rhymes of Cape Breton and Newfoundland. Glace Bay: Brodie Printing Service.

MACGILLIVRAY, Don. 1983. 'Glace Bay: Images and impressions.' In Benjamin Buckloh and Robert Wilkie (eds.), Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 170-191. Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press.

MACNEIL, Neil. 1971 [1951]. The Highland Heart in Nova Scotia. Toronto: Saunders of Toronto Limited.

MUISE, Del. 1980. 'The making of an industrial Community: Cape Breton coal towns, 1867-1900.' In Don Macgillivray and B.D. Tennyson (eds.), Cape Breton Historical Essays, 76-94. Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press.

NEARING, Joseph and Angus F. MacDonald. 1975. Interviews. September.

POTEET, Lewis J. 1987. 'Recent work in Maritime linguistics.' Acadiensis XVI. 2: 122-129.