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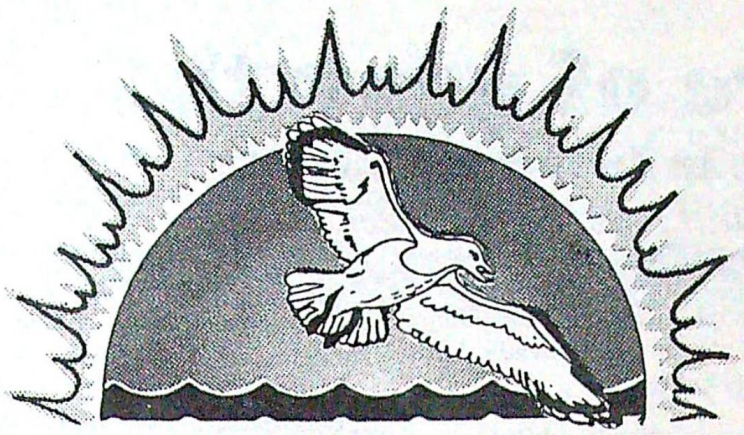

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Echoes from Mac-Talla

by Mary Anne Ducharme

Jonathan G. MacKinnon died in 1944, not so long ago. In print publications he seems to be larger than life, eulogized in terms of high praise as the publisher and editor of a newspaper called *Mac Talla*. The title, meaning *echo* in Gaelic, is ironically suitable for both the man and his work. At the present time, there is no fully researched documentation of his life and work in published form, and a great many people in Inverness County seem to have "never heard of him," or know very little about him. Yet this Whycocomagh-born man could serve well as one of many available role models belonging to our own history.

Mac Talla, often referred to as a "Cape Breton treasure," was the longest running Gaelic language newspaper anywhere, before or since. *Mac Talla,* however, is not easily accessible to a broad audience, for most are not able to read the original Gaelic. Kaye MacDonald of New Waterford has translated portions through the Beaton Institute, under a grant from the federal department of the Secretary of State to the University College of Cape Breton. *Mac Talla* is also indexed in Gaelic with a selective index in English, and copies of the original newspaper are in private collections and on microfilm in various archives.

I found a few people who remember Jonathan MacKinnon, some of whom attended the September meeting of the Whycocomagh Historical Society. The members had generously devoted a whole evening to the sharing of information about Jonathan G. MacKinnon. I was able to garner personal details -- for instance, that he was short and stocky (I imagined him tall and lanky for some reason), that he was a bit eccentric, sometimes gruff, sometimes charming, and always highly regarded for his work.

He apparently enjoyed working with children, and the affection was returned. He gave candy bars to school kids for special occasions, planned camping excursions, took an active part in sports leagues, worked with Scouts, and with a youth group called "The 19's."

As a boy, he was frequently ill and had a great deal of trouble with his legs, and though I cannot find proof, I suspect that he was afflicted with polio at an early age, and this deprived him of the companionship of other children at his home in Dunakyn near Whycocomagh. Perhaps he sought some of the "fun" that he had missed in his own youth.

The iliness also prevented him from going to school regularly, but he was an avid reader, and his family was well educated. Somehow, he managed to accomplish a great depth of education far beyond the ordinary, and this was reflected in *Mac Talla.*

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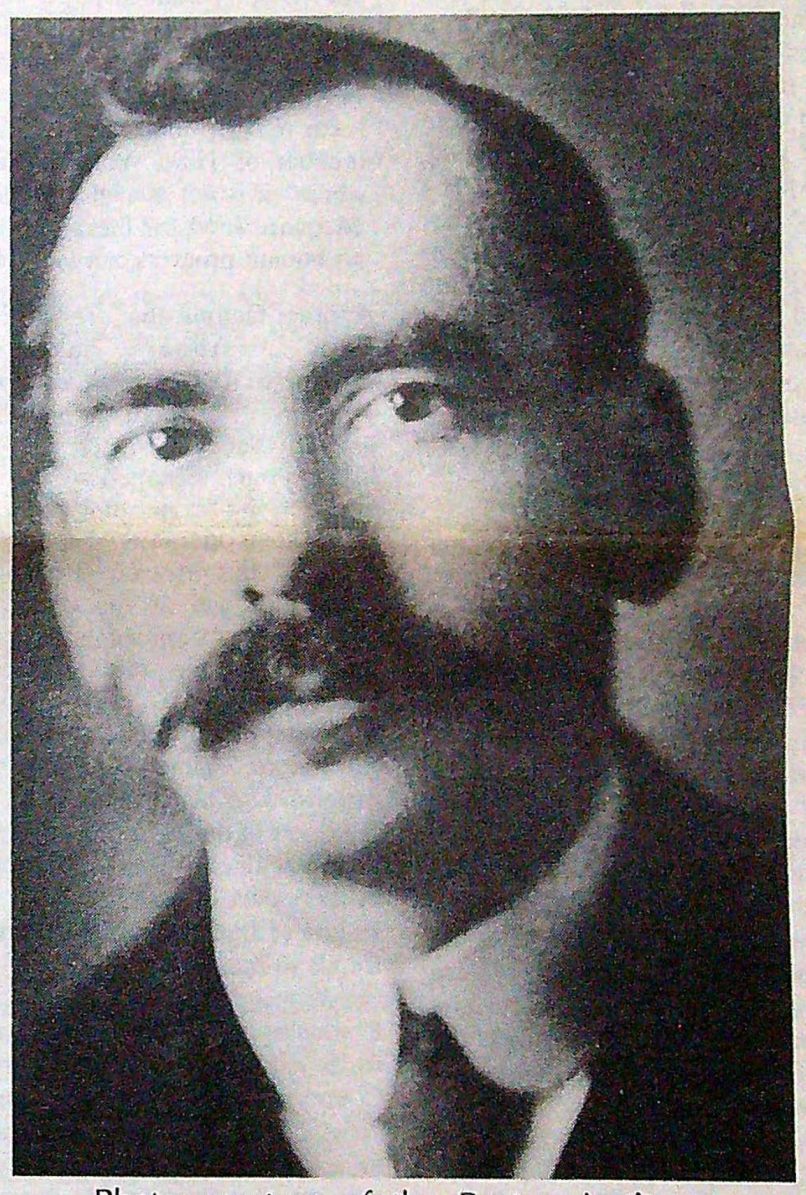

Photo courtesy of the Beaton Institute

Echoes from Mac-Talla

The story of

Jonathan G. MacKinnon

A future of growth:

Agriculture in Inverness County

Agricultural Awareness Week

October 12 -16

by Mary Anne Ducharme

In Inverness County, there was a time when most families grew their own food, and when there was a large local trade in meat, dairy products, fruits and vegetables. All the local stores carried local products. While many mixed farms were subsistence farms -- that is, they produced enough to feed the family and bring in only modest amounts of cash income, there is ample evidence that a considerable number of farms provided a comfortable living. This is not to say that the end of the last century and the early years of this one were "the good old days," and everything has gone downhill from there. The "good old days" were often harsh, the work very hard, and generations led lives bound to the needs of the land. Life could be narrow and restrictive, and restless young people wanted to break away. Sometimes they had to leave, to migrate seasonally at least to other jobs to subsidize the family farm.

The inevitable happened, the agricultural way of life gave way to the industrial revolution which touched rural Inverness County in the form of the Sydney Steel Plant. Steel's lure was strong because it promised cash, a commodity in short supply in the agricultural rural districts. Better transportation, in the form of trains and the automobile made it easier for both young men and women to find industrial or other urban jobs. This was a pattern happening all over the world and was not unique to our area, and the emptying of rural areas continues to the present.

World economic trade patterns shifted too with better communication and transportation. Evidence of this is ample in every home cupboard right now. The canned spinach is from Arkansas, U.S.A., the apples from Argentina, the oranges from Florida, the strawberry jam from Poland, the mushrooms are from China, the tuna is from Thailand, the coffee from Brazil, etc. Competition in the commodities is fierce, and often it is only the very large or corporation farms that can stay competitive, and the family farm is disappearing rapidly from the rural landscape.

Local stores bypassed local products in favour of cheaper imports. Consumers take cheap food for granted, not understanding the underlying reasons. These reasons often include wages and working conditions that no Canadian would accept here. We want cheap food, but we don't want to pay a decent living wage to those who produce it. Few Canadians understand the value of food; but they would learn if, right now, they visited any number of Third World countries where it is not available. Without adequate food for life and health, no human progress can take place.

Another factor is that, traditionally, Cape Bretoners have not recognized that a farm can be a farm even if it does not have animals. Beef production here has long been handicapped by such low return to the farmer that many can hardly keep operating. Sheep have virtually disappeared from the Island because of the disastrous Devco importation some years ago that brought in diseases, and because of the ever growing numbers of coyotes. New dairy farms are almost prohibitively expensive to begin because of the high cost of quota, stock, buildings, and machinery. Established dairy farmers are uneasy about the results of free trade and uncertain trends in marketing.

Producing vegetables and small fruits has been viewed in Inverness County as a non-commercial activity for family consumption, and as a hobby. Few have seriously thought of it as a viable business entreprise, even with the example provided by the Eyking family. There are large scale producers of fruits and vegetable crops in eastern Cape Breton, and no resaon why the same cannot be produced here if buyers would support it

When rural Inverness County began population decline, the conclusion was that agriculture, once the mainstay of economy here, along with fishing and forestry, was severely limited because of poor weather, poor soil, distance from population centres and poor local markets. The land was good for growing trees, and that was about all. On the surface, these assumptions seem so self-evident that they have not been seriously challenged.

While it is true that our land base in this County is, in some areas, too hilly and rugged for cultivation, and that our growing season is short and unpredictable, there is much possible now in agricultural development that was never possible before. There is fertile land here, once incredibly productive even when cruder methods of farming were used; there are pockets of land now given to marginally productive hayfields that would grow huge crops of potatoes, turnips, peas, beans, berries, cabbages, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, -- and much more. Now there is better understanding of soil, better fertilizers and weed and pest controls. Now there is farm machinery that is enormously more efficient and labour saving. There are wider potentials in markets, especially now when more and more people are aware of the link between good health and the consumption of low fat foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

And recently, the Atlantic Co-operative stores have declared that they will buy local products when these products are available. This is a return to the original concept of the Co-operative Movement which was to serve the needs and desires of the local community. This was somehow lost for quite a number of years when all decisions were dictated in Moncton regarding what local stores could buy, and at what price. Prices were determined on a scale that limited the participation of local producers whose costs of production were higher because of smaller acreages, shorter growing season, and higher levels of expense over all, including wages. A grower of fresh peas here, for instance, has to compete with big business farms in the southern United States which have a long growing season, lower wages, cannery facilities, and world-wide marketing networks. A potato grower on Cape Breton is competing with Prince Edward Island. Yet there is also potential here for an excellent product and Cape Breton could be self-sufficient, as well as an exporter.

People, especially educators, in Inverness County should re-think some of their assumptions about a future in agriculture here. Somehow the attitude has long been one of farming as a marginal occupation. Talented or intelligent people went away to urban jobs, it was assumed, and "being tied down to the farm" was a kind of purgatory for people who didn't know how to do better for themselves.

Well, none of that applies to the present situation, and perhaps it never did. Farmers have to be business people, they have to be highly educated and intelligent. The vocation of farming is challenging, competitive, and highly technical. There are exciting new developments and methods. There are opportunities, there are jobs, there is a way to reverse, or at least slow down the decline in rural population. continued page ten

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