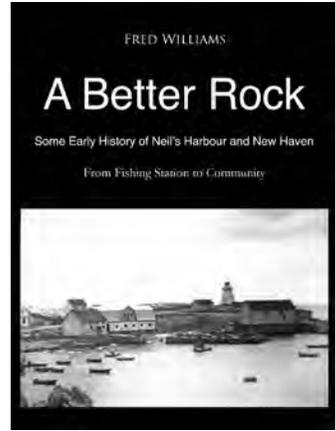
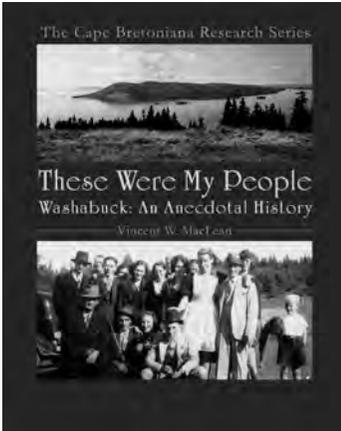


Ken Donovan

Reading About Rural Cape Breton



These two books, *These Were My People, Washabuck: An Anecdotal History* by Vincent W. MacLean published by Cape Breton University Press and *A Better Rock: Some Early History of Neil's Harbour and New Haven* by Fred Williams, printed by Northside printers, are remarkable accounts of two diverse communities in Victoria County. They set a high standard for the history of small communities in Cape Breton. These books, written by two teachers who lived in their respective communities, spent their lives listening to oral traditions, observing interactions among friends and neighbours and researching in every conceivable type of historical record. Of the 18 counties in Nova Scotia, Victoria County remains the least populated and has among the lowest per capita income in the province. These histories thus describe communities past their prime but the villages still have a vibrant, living presence, part of a long history of aboriginal and European occupation.

Vince MacLean describes the immigration of Scottish Gaelic families who settled in Washabuck from the Isle of Barra and Caithness in Northern Scotland during the summer of 1817. A second wave of Scottish immigrants arrived in 1821 and over the next half century they cleared land for farming and fishing in the Bras d'Or Lake (referred to as the Lakes in local parlance). Washabuck, a peninsula 15 kilometres in length, is composed of

a number of separate communities including Lower Washabuck, Washabuck Centre and Upper Washabuck, among others.

MacLean's history is a large, and, at times, unwieldy book of 390 pages. Composed of 20 chapters, they range from the history of early residents, visitors and neighbours to the role of education, religion and music. This book, similar to an encyclopaedia, has many redeeming features, none more so than the sense of humanity and intimacy that comes across in the work, especially when MacLean refers to "My People". This sense of humanity is demonstrated in the kindness and genuine concern for relatives and neighbours. MacLean notes that there is a strong "maternal influence on this work" since it was his grandmothers, descendants of Washabuck MacNeil pioneer families, who had the "leading influence on my lifelong interest in local history, lore and genealogy." (p. XIII)

The genealogy becomes central to the MacLean family and the community stories; the book describes how the early people of Washabuck transferred their culture and traditions from the old country to the new. In particular, the oral tradition of the patronymic family, that is the identification of a male ancestor's name "by referring to the immediate predecessors of an individual, rather than referring to someone in the ancient past" was passed on. Much like other ancient and non-literate cultures, the families and their stories were thus preserved through the careful and repeated enumeration of the family ancestors. Like his grandmothers, mother and their forbearers, MacLean absorbed a strong sense of family fraternity that helps to explain, in part at least, why he collected such diverse material on the Washabuck area over a fifty-year period.

To his credit, MacLean also places the history of Washabuck in the broader historical context of Cape Breton, Canadian and European history. Besides a wealth of primary sources, MacLean's endnotes include a wide range of published material providing the broader picture. Part of the broader story includes the disappearance of the Washabuck people of the 19th and 20th centuries. Many cultures "freeze" on the periphery when they transfer from one region to another, especially if the transplanted culture is located in an isolated area. Rural communities

throughout Cape Breton, including Washabuck, were not able to sustain their growing numbers and as people moved away to the “Boston states”, the Sydneys and beyond, Gaelic began to decline.

Whereas both of Vince MacLean’s grandmothers were fluent Gaelic speakers and singers, his mother Rose MacNeil MacLean (1912-1999) and his father Michael A. MacLean (1911-2007) could only understand Gaelic. Vince MacLean laments that Gaelic was not spoken in his home. Thus, the oral tradition of the patronymic family, the traditional means of preserving the history, was lost and the chain, long lasting yet fragile, was broken. The descendants of the people of Washabuck, Cape Bretoners in general and the wider public owe Vince MacLean a debt of gratitude since he has researched, written and thereby preserved the history of the community. MacLean’s work does not have a conclusion but rather ends with a chapter on politics. Perhaps this is fitting because, in his encyclopaedic fashion, Vince MacLean will continue to gather historical evidence as part of his personal quest and his collected material will doubtless be passed on to some future researcher and writer.

Fred William’s book, *A Better Rock: Some Early History of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven, From Fishing Station to Community*, examines the social, economic and cultural history of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven. Williams describes how the people of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven originally came from Dorset, a county located in the southwest coast of England, and settled in southwest Newfoundland during the early part of the 19th century. During the years 1870 to 1900, the fishery was unsustainable in southwest Newfoundland, and these fishing families sought “A Better Rock” and eventually moved to northern Cape Breton and established the present-day communities of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven, settlements unique in Cape Breton. The people, followers of the Anglican Church, had a lifestyle devoted solely to fishing. By 1900 the population of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven amounted to approximately 500 people.

The book has a maturity and sophistication rarely seen in local histories and this is largely due to the quality of the historical research and the writing. The story of the research and writ-

ing for this project became part of Fred Williams' personal and professional life. In an attempt to protect primary resource material that otherwise would have disappeared, Williams established an archives at Cabot High School in 1975. He encouraged people North of Smokey to deposit original documents including papers, diaries, store receipts, memoirs and photographs relating to the history of northern Cape Breton in the Cabot Archives. His archival collection made an invaluable contribution to the history of Northern Cape Breton and his work gained a reputation among researchers working on Northern Cape Breton. This archive remained at the school until 1987 and was eventually transferred to North Highlands Community Museum in Cape North. The Museum became the de facto publisher of the book and was one of the major sponsors of the work.

Williams experience and the process founding the Cabot Archives comprised part of his research for his forthcoming book. Researching archival material in England, the national archives in Ottawa as well as the provincial archives in Halifax, Williams examined directories, newspapers, missionary reports as well as official records including census material, gazettes, royal commissions, petitions relating to the fisheries, roads, post offices and light houses, among others. Besides his diligent research, Williams, a native son, was intimately familiar with the community, the geography, the folklore and the "cast of characters" and their "personal histories".

At least one other element – the use of critical analysis – sets this work apart from other Cape Breton community histories. Williams, through his research and experience, demonstrated that there was often conflicting evidence and therefore one or more ways to interpret historical events in the community. Much like a professional historian, he did not rush to judgement but offered different perspectives or interpretations. "Some sources and perceived truths often interfere with being open about events of the past", notes Williams. "Mythologies are built and sometimes get in the way of historical investigation. After a century or so, stories take the place of fact; some of them need a good plain telling, others are just fine the way they are." Williams provides numerous examples in *A Better Rock* of how myth in the com-

munity trumped the evidence. The story of how Hungry Cove changed its name to New Haven is only one instance among many. (p. 19)

Well written and divided into 28 chapters, the book covers topics ranging from early settlement to the fishery, schools, wood cutting, boat building, religious denominations, social interaction and civic duty in 378 pages. Some of Williams finest writing, covering a number of chapters, includes his material on the fishery. In concise language, and without adjectives, he explains a host of technical fishing terms ranging from trawling and long lining to ring lobsters and the intricacies of the fishing grounds. His description of how fishermen defined a fishing ground at sea is compelling because there was no particular “set of marks to define a fishing ground” from one generation to another, let alone in fog, before the beginning of modern location technology. Drawing upon knowledge gained from his father, community tradition, and his own research, Williams noted that fishermen used a system of visual triangulation by aligning buildings, landmarks, rock formations and other features to form two sides of a triangle.

Using a system of compass and watch, “Fishermen steamed at a particular speed on a predetermined course from the last landmark to the fishing grounds...” “It was an intuitive process; they knew just how fast and how long they should steam.” (p. 102) The marks of the traditional fishing grounds have long been lost and had more in common with navigation techniques of earlier centuries than present-day satellite location. Williams, however, does pass on his information on the marks of the traditional fishing grounds of Neil’s Harbour and New Haven.

Williams learned to use a computer-mapping program and he has produced high-quality maps of fish traps, lobster factories, fishing grounds and other geographical features. Fred Williams has produced a fine book that will stand the test of time. His history of Neil’s harbour and New Haven is deliberate, analytical and written with a deft editorial hand.