With Respect to the Dead: Reconstructing a Historic View of Death in Gaelic Nova Scotia

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Abstract: Drawing on a combination of oral history and archival research, this article reconstructs a historic view of death and dying in areas of the province settled by Scottish Gaels. It discusses beliefs and customs associated with death, giving special attention to traditional house wakes. Inspired by studies in culturally related communities in Ireland, Scotland, and Newfoundland, this study highlights insider perspectives of local customs and beliefs in order to develop a clearer understanding of the relationship previous generations had to death in Gaelic Nova Scotia. This study concludes by suggesting why some mortuary customs were abandoned during the second part of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Scottish Gaels; death; wakes; folklore; oral history; Nova Scotia

1. Introduction

Characterized by pockets of cultural homogeneity and geographic isolation, regional settlement patterns allowed for the retention and adaptation of various ethnic markers in Nova Scotia. Because the funeral industry was slow to develop in the region, traditional death and funerary practices were also maintained in parts of the province well into the second half of the twentieth century (Poulter 2011). Since that time, social, religious, and economic trends have fostered a very different relationship to death and dying in Nova Scotia, meaning many traditional customs and beliefs associated with the end of life are now foreign to younger residents. Drawing on a combination of oral history and archival research, this article explores customs and beliefs associated with the end of life in order to reconstruct a historic view of death in areas of the province settled by Scottish Gaels.

2. Literature Review

Despite its demographic strength during the nineteenth century, implicit and explicit institutional, social and economic pressure to assimilate eventually impeded intergenerational transmission of Gaelic in Nova Scotia, first on the mainland and then in Cape Breton. Combined with outmigration, this situation created a linguistic tipping point during the mid-twentieth century after which few children were socialized in Gaelic (Mertz 1989). Partly for this reason, fieldwork with local tradition bearers has usually focused on elements of the oral tradition that are especially susceptible to language attrition: songs and complex tales, for instance. As a result, customs and traditions related to death and dying—important rites of passage in any society—have received disproportionately little attention in studies of this folk culture.

This is not to suggest such material has been entirely ignored by collectors. Consider, for instance, Mary Fraser, who was active during the first part of the twentieth century. She devoted significant attention to recording customs and beliefs associated with wakes and funerals in parts of eastern Nova Scotia settled by Scottish Gaels (Fraser [1932] n.d.). Ronald Caplan later made a similar contribution,

publishing valuable accounts of local mortuary traditions in a series of interviews he conducted as editor of *Cape Breton's Magazine* (Caplan 1977).

Recent academic studies have expanded these efforts in a more analytical direction in order to explore the social and cultural insights that can be gained from examining mortuary customs in Gaelic Nova Scotia. In an article on gravestone inscriptions, for instance, Laurie Stanley-Blackwell and Michael Linkletter show how the language used on these markers mirrors contemporary tensions between assimilation and linguistic retention (Stanley-Blackwell and Linkletter 2018). More recently, these authors have argued that cemeteries served as important repositories of evolving group identities for Gaels in Nova Scotia (Stanley-Blackwell and Linkletter 2020). Gillian Poulter also draws on primary evidence from this community in order to explore the development of the funeral industry in Nova Scotia (Poulter 2011).

Much work remains to be done, however. For example, no research has yet focused on the traditional house wake in Gaelic Nova Scotia. This omission is striking given the potential for research suggested by studies in culturally related communities in Ireland, Scotland, and Newfoundland (Ó Súilleabháin 1967; Newton 2006; Narváez 1994; Butler 1982). These studies also highlight the value of working with local residents to better understand historic responses to death and dying. This is vital since many outside observers have been prone to biased or superficial understandings of the subject (Lysaght 2003, p. 404; Narváez 1994, p. 289). In this article, oral history takes a leading role because it addresses gaps in the written record and provides a fuller, more nuanced, understanding of the folk tradition from the perspective of cultural insiders.[1]

3. Discussion of Evidence

Admittedly, the cohesive approach to cultural identity this study takes is somewhat artificial. Identities in the region have always been highly localized, usually informed by religious and ancestral origins. At the same time, a common linguistic and cultural framework shaped a similar worldview and mortuary tradition among Scottish Gaels. In this respect, group members shared much in common with other ethnic communities in the region, including French Acadians and members of the Mi'kmaq First Nation. When a death occurred, a routine followed for generations was set in motion. While the details varied according to community and class, its essential elements remained the same.

Like beautiful tombstone carvings infused with meaning, customs and traditions sometimes require interpretation. What was obvious to one generation is not necessarily clear to another. This situation is especially true in cases where communities have witnessed significant social, cultural, or spiritual change over a relatively short period of time. Reflecting larger social and religious trends, many ways of addressing death have changed a great deal since the settlement period.

For example, although the practice is unknown to most residents of the Maritimes today, historic sources record the role of keening the dead in Ireland and Scotland. This was a centuries-old custom in which women used stock poetic elements to improvise a vocal lament for the dead. Recent scholarship on keening shows how it opens up new avenues for understanding female perspectives from the historic past and reminds us of its former importance in Scotland (Blankenhorn 2019; Stiùbhart 2019). According to a version of events published in 1916, Margaret MacKenzie keened at the deathbed of Father James MacDonald, the priest who accompanied the Glenaladale settlers to Prince Edward Island. In the following passage, Alex D. MacLean conjures up the scene, which, he explains, occurred on the island during the winter of 1785:

> The light in his eyes quivered for a moment and then went out; the body relaxed and the greyness of death spread over his face. Then the strongly repressed grief of the people burst forth in weeping and sobbing until it took the form of the lament or 'Caoin' peculiar to

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1　All interviews referenced in this work adhered to professional ethical standards and all those named agreed to participate in this research. Sincere thanks are offered for their contributions.

the Celtic race—the articulation of musical or rhythmical expression of grief which makes it a luxury akin to great joy, as, like joy is a deep, powerful, stirring of the human heart. (MacLean 1972, p. 12)[2]

According to the account, settlers found the death especially distressing since the priest was young and died without being administered the last rites. They were comforted in the belief, however, that his soul would revisit all the places he had known in life, including the home of his nativity, before it departed this world (MacLean 1972, 11). The degree to which previous generations saw the world through a framework informed by religious and vernacular belief is made clear by Angus Hector MacLean, who was raised in a Protestant part of early twentieth-century Cape Breton. Recalling his childhood in Seal Cove, Inverness County, MacLean writes, " . . . we did live in two worlds, and this second world answered many questions that baffle us in more enlightened and sophisticated times" (MacLean 1976, p. 67).

Though there were always nonbelievers, the supernatural was an important part of the way many area residents interpreted the world around them. While instances of active divination are not absent from local tradition, stories in which people are the passive recipients of psychic intelligence are much more common. Signs were interpreted from a variety of natural phenomena: a light flashing across the darkened sky, or a ringing in the ear, for instance. Many accounts centre on death and dying. Stories tell of spectres following families, appearing as heralds of death generation after generation, for example. In one case, the spirit appears in the form of a headless horseman, whose unusual gait is attributed to a loose horseshoe (Rankin 2004, pp. 63–64). Neil MacNeil claims the horseman regularly appeared at wakes associated with a certain family in Washabuck, Victoria County:

All went well until there was a death, and then the old beheaded ghost started his wild riding anew. Grandfather said he knew people who had seen this ghost; and so terrifying was the sight that they never were the same people again. This family's wakes were not popular with their neighbours, and Grandfather had never attended one, but he believed the story. (MacNeil [1948] 1980, p. 81)

As many scholars have noted, sickness and death were more obvious and open elements of everyday life in the past. The sick and dying were cared for at home, not in hospitals, and friends and family, not funeral directors, were responsible for the preparation of the body for burial. When a death occurred, a representative would be sent out to relay the news to neighbours and other family members. At one time, this was done on foot and was considered a sacred and privileged duty according to William Cameron, who chronicled life in early twentieth-century Antigonish County (Cameron 1999, p. 17)

Death was a communal concern and community members were expected to participate in the rituals associated with it. Going to wakes and funerals did much to strengthen community bonds, solidify family reputations, and break down religious barriers. Those who made little effort to participate could expect few mourners when their own time came. Perhaps as a consequence, Rev. Alexander Ross noted that funerals attracted such large crowds in nineteenth-century Pictou County, he chose to preach at them (MacMillan 1988, p. 55).

As word spread that someone had died, a local man would usually volunteer to build a coffin. In the early days of settlement, coffins might need to be improvised. During the pioneering era in Pictou County, for instance, an East River man was buried in a hollowed-out hemlock log

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[2] The background to this description is intriguing. MacLean based it on an article entitled "The Last Sermon" which was published on March 12, 1959 in *The Casket*. In his work, MacLean provides a nearly verbatim retelling of the death of Father MacDonald but adds Gaelic. The article in *The Casket* is itself a reprint of an article bearing the same title which was originally printed in the May 20, 1916 edition of the *Catholic Bulletin* of St. Paul-Minneapolis. The author of that article was Helen Hughes Hielscher, a medical doctor who was born in 1863 in Bedford, Prince Edward Island. How she learned the story is unclear.

(Cameron 1972, p. 212). Similarly, Captain Angus MacLellan, who settled in West Lake Ainslie, split a block of pine using an axe and wedge. The rough boards he fashioned were used to build a small casket for his young child (MacDougall 1922, p. 527).

As settlements grew, a certain number of pine or spruce boards were usually set aside for this purpose. A resident of Boisdale, Cape Breton County, had the boards of his coffin measured and planned well in advance (MacMillan 2020). Over his lifetime, Alexander McPherson is credited with building more than two hundred coffins free of charge (Stanley-Blackwell 2016, p. 44). Similarly, Little Donald Sutherland is still remembered for the many coffins he built in Earltown, Colchester County (Sutherland 1980, p.84). In order to improve their appearance, carpenters sometimes polished coffins with alder ashes and tallow or covered them in black cloth (Cumming et al. [1984] 2009, p. 148). Depending on the availability of imported coffins, local carpenters were responsible for this work well into the twentieth century. The last coffin built on Pictou Island, located several kilometres from the mainland, for example, was made for Frank Munroe in 1974 (Munro 1984, p. 56).

Those who built coffins would not usually charge for their services and were believed by some to be instilled with the ability to predict death due to their work. Many stories are still told of carpenters seeing lights around their tools, or hearing noises coming from lumber reserved for that purpose, days before a death. Hector B. MacIsaac, who was raised in St. Ninian, Inverness County, provides a good example:

> I know one place. A fellow was coming home this night and he heard building; hammering and all this, you know. He couldn't figure out what the heck it was. And I think it was a night or two afterwards, I think it was his uncle or somebody died. And they ended up making the casket in there—and he heard the same thing again. (MacIsaac 2006)

For much of the twentieth century, undertakers and their craft were foreign to most residents of rural Nova Scotia. In their place, local men and women prepared bodies for burial. Contemporary tradition bearers recall the care they took in this task. For modern residents accustomed to funeral homes and cremation, the degree of intimacy these elders describe can be startling. One told me about how his mother gently held the jaw of a recently deceased community member until rigor mortis ensured it would remain in a dignified position. Another remembered using hot wax to seal the lips of an elderly neighbour to ensure no odors escaped. Jane MacKenzie was so respected for her ability to prepare bodies in Gairloch, Pictou County, her name was included in a local history of the community (Hawkins et al. 1984, p. 51).

Once washed, the body was covered with a white sheet and laid on an improvised platform until the coffin was finished. Depending on how long this took, the deceased might be waked for the first night under this sheet alone. When we spoke several years ago, Rhodena MacLellan told me it was once customary to place a bowl of salt on the corpse in Ottawa Brook, Victoria County (MacLellan 2005). While this custom is recorded as far afield as the United States, Mary Fraser writes about its practice in Nova Scotia (Fraser [1932] n.d., pp. 51, 111). Ostensibly used to prevent the body from swelling, salt is considered a sacramental within the Catholic Church and popularly associated with the power to repel evil (Napier [1879] 2008, p. 73).

At one time, it was customary for the corpse to be dressed in a shroud. Rita Gillis, who was raised in Grand Mira, Cape Breton County, recalled shrouds being purchased several kilometres away in Gabarus, while Theresa MacDonald remembered her mother making them during her youth in Ardness, Antigonish County (Gillis 2004; MacDonald 2005). Sometimes these garments would be acquired years in advance. By the time Annabelle Gillis died at 106, her death shroud had crumbled into dust (Spalding 2006, p. 3).

Inside the coffin, family and friends might place secular or religious mementos of personal significance: a pack of cigarettes or rosary beads, for instance. In his memoirs, Francis MacGregor recalled a touching scene from his youth in which a woman placed a warm brick and mittens alongside the remains of a neighbour who froze to death (MacGregor 1976, p. 22). A friend in Inverness County

continues a family tradition of putting a small piece of a tree from the family property alongside the remains of relatives. She also sprinkles water from the nearby brook on their caskets. Through these actions, natural features of the local landscape, invested with meaning over time, take on sacred overtones, used alongside rosary beads and holy water (MacDonald 2018, 170).

As in other regions, the corpse was usually laid out in the parlor or front room of the deceased's home for a wake. This space might be reserved for this purpose and rarely used otherwise, as described in Newfoundland (Butler 1982, p. 29). In order to prepare the wake house for visitors, pictures were sometimes removed from the room and mirrors covered. In some houses, the clock was stopped until the end of the wake. Symbolically, then, time stopped. As folklorist Gary Butler argues, changes to the interior of the home in preparation for a wake were a way of creating a sacred space out of a profane one (Butler 1982). Behaviour was also moderated at the wake; secular songs and instrumental music were usually prohibited, although singing psalms and hymns was common among Protestants.

As the house was prepared, so was the body. Though it was washed and shaved, little else could be done to provide a lifelike appearance to the corpse. Before the advent of embalming, ice was the primary recourse residents had to delay the onset of decomposition. Because this technique was only partially effective, bodies were sometimes kept outside during the heat of the summer on account of odors. To be sure, people were not shielded from the reality of death. Children were expected to attend wakes, soon growing familiar with seeing the dead laid out among the living. Visitors were also expected to kiss or touch the body, a practice that continues today. Ascribing several rationales for its importance, Helen Creighton records this custom in multiple parts of Nova Scotia (Creighton 1970, p. 150; 1976, pp. 20, 63).

While wakes continue to be held in private homes on occasion, most now take place in funeral homes. Prior to this change of venue, it was widely believed the corpse should not be left alone until it was buried. This necessitated that house wakes be held overnight. Contemporary tradition bearers recall typical wakes lasting two, or even three, nights. In exceptional cases, however, the body might be kept even longer. Malcolm Campbell, who lived in Woodbine, Cape Breton County, remembered a wake that lasted four or five nights (Caplan 1974, p. 23). Archie MacDonald told me about a wake that lasted closer to a week due to an extended period of stormy winter weather (MacDonald 2020).

The practice of keeping watch over the dead is widespread and centuries old. Evidence suggests wakes were once the norm in much of Catholic Europe. Not surprisingly, given its prominence in popular conceptions of wakes, most recent scholarship on the custom focuses on Ireland. But aspects of the tradition have also been examined in Gaelic Scotland. Michael Newton, for example, has drawn attention to the lost tradition of dancing at wakes, providing contemporary descriptions of the practice and theorizing about its decline (Newton 2006). On this side of the Atlantic, wakes have also attracted considerable attention in Newfoundland (Butler 1982; Buckley and Cartwright 1983; Narváez 1994). Taken together, this work provides important insights into how previous generations conceptualized death and mourning.

Whether they came from across the country or across the road, visitors to the wake house would be warmly welcomed. Periods of prayer, sometimes led by a minister or priest, dovetailed with visiting and eating. Family members were expected to serve tea and feed guests.[3] Given the historic division of gender roles, this meant that women of the family were often kept busy in the kitchen. Describing the situation in Inverness County, one nineteenth-century observer claimed, "the family is constantly at hard work, night and day, serving successive meals to those who arrive" (Tennyson 2014, p. 254). On account of the abundance of food they served at this occasions, oral tradition holds that attendance at wakes in one local community rose significantly during the Great Depression (MacDonell 2002).

Perhaps, however, there were deeper motivations for the consumption of food and drink at wakes. Food is a habitual element of ritual loaded with symbolic significance, both comforting and life

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3   For comparable information on gender and clerical roles in wakes in Barra, Scotland, see (Vallee 1955).

affirming (McLaughlin 2019, p. 3). Mikhail Bakhtin describes its power as the "the triumph of life over death" (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 282–83). As a result, its consumption sends an important message to mourners about strength and vitality in the face of death and loss.

Catholic residents also drew on vernacular beliefs regarding the consumption of food and drink at wakes. Writing during the first part of the twentieth century, Mary Fraser records that people believed " . . . every bite that was served during the wake went towards the release of the soul if it were suffering in Purgatory" (Fraser [1932] n.d., p. 112). Expanding on this principle, Daniel M. R. MacNeil, who was born at Benacadie Pond, Cape Breton County, told me that having a cup of tea at the wake was a way of "respecting the dead" according to his grandmother:

> *Bha iad a' creidsinn nan rachadh tu dhan an aire, agus dh'òl thu cupa tì 'is dh'ithe thu rudeigin, gu robh thu dèanamh feum dhan tè a dh'eug no fear a dh'eug. (MacNeil 2002)*

> (They were believing that if you went to the wake, and drank a cup of tea and you ate something, that you were doing something useful for the woman who died or the man who died.)

Irish sources suggest those who attended wakes saw themselves as guests of the deceased. Patricia Lysaght reminds us the dead are usually among the first to be addressed at a wake, with mourners lining up to say prayers over the corpse before socializing with the living (Lysaght 2003, p. 419). In Nova Scotia, some traditions bearers also claim that refusing hospitality at a wake would be considered a slight against the family of the deceased (Chisholm 2002; MacNeil 2020). Mickey MacNeil, who lives in Jamesville, Victoria County, takes this a step further, explaining it would be akin to turning down an offer of hospitality from the dead themselves (MacNeil 2020).

To be sure, the deceased had sometimes played a leading role in preparing for guests. Archibald MacKinnon, who lived along the shores of Lake Ainslie, Inverness County, included a clause in his will that five gallons of rum be supplied to those at his funeral, much to the chagrin of the local clergyman (MacDougall 1922, p. 516). Similarly, John MacKinnon, one of the first pioneers of the Keppoch, Antigonish County, made sure two gallons of rum would be available for those who came to mark his passing (MacKenzie 2003, p. 51).

As these examples suggest, wakes and funerals were not always solemn, religious occasions. If the deceased were old, and the death expected, the mood could be quite lively. Indeed, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich suggests the atmosphere of the wake in Ireland depended largely on whether the death was seen as timely or not (Ó Crualaoich 1998, pp. 195–199). To this point, Cathie MacKinnon, who lived in Big Beach, Cape Breton County, characterized some of the wakes she attended in her youth as similar to weddings today (MacKinnon 2006). Likewise, Archie Neil Chisholm claimed wakes were good places for young couples to meet and court in Margaree, Inverness County, telling Elizabeth Doherty, "It was a great place to date a girl, and take a girl home from the wake" (Quoted in Doherty 1996, p. 123). In the following account, C. H. Farnham, who visited the region during the late nineteenth century, paints a vivid picture of a wake house in Inverness County:

> It is considered a marked offense not to come to a wake and, when there, not to eat and drink abundantly. Two or three funerals near together have actually ruined a family. The pious and aged in the room where the corpse lies generally occupy their time in reading and praying, while the young, in another room, solace their grief by eating, drinking and flirting. (Tennyson 2014, p. 254)[4]

During the night, when the family went to bed, a small group of mourners would volunteer to spend the night sitting up with the body. Those who remained did what they could to stay awake:

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[4]　For an account that notes flirting at wakes in Gaelic Scotland, see (Watson 2004).

drinking tea and discussing the deceased, for instance. Many tradition bearers also describe wakes as being good places to hear stories. Frequently, these tales focused on the supernatural, with the narrators using the atmosphere of the wake house to their advantage. Indeed, wakes and storytelling were so closely connected in local consciousness, Collie MacDonnell, who lived in Port Hood, Inverness County, claimed some people would decide to stay based on whether a good storyteller was present (MacDonnell 2005).

Accounts of tricks being played at wakes are well documented in Ireland, Scotland, and Newfoundland. Based on the available evidence, a comparable tradition once existed in Nova Scotia. Katie Maggie MacLeod, from Broad Cove Marsh, Inverness County, told me about a wake where the body was taken out of the coffin, propped up in the corner, and given a pipe to smoke (MacLeod 2010). During her research in Antigonish County, Juanita MacLean spoke to a man who confessed to sitting up an old woman in her coffin, curling her hair, and putting a pipe in her mouth (MacLean 1992, p. 36).

While these examples come from Catholic communities, similar activities also occurred among Protestants. John Abram claimed that playing tricks was common at wakes during his youth in St. Esprit, Richmond County. Describing an incident in which someone snuck up on a group of mourners by crawling out the window, Abram humorously remarked, "'*S e seòrsa do bhleigeard a bh'ann*" [He was a sort of rascal] (Abram 2013). Alex Kerr, who lived in North River, Victoria County, apparently knew similar characters; he attended a wake where an old woman had a clothespin pinned on her nose after she fell asleep (Caplan 1979, p. 40).

A significant number of narratives about playing tricks at wakes describe young men animating the corpse by manipulating the head. No doubt these actions were meant to play up tales that circulated about people who were presumed dead coming back to life during the wake. In the following account, Mickey MacNeil provides an example:

> *Uell, air a dh'eugadh duine—uell, tha grunn bhliadhnichean ann a-nisd—bhiodh iad ga*
>
> *chur air eileadram, a chanadh iad ris. Bhiodh cuibhrig air a chur air. Agus bhiodh na*
>
> *daoine, bhiodh iad a' caithris fad na h-oidhdche, dha no thrì oidhcheannan, bhiodh iad a'*
>
> *caithris fad na h-oidhche.*
>
> *An aire a bha seo, co dhiubh, bha na daoine a's an t-seòmbar far an robh e,*
>
> *chaidh na deamhain eile a-mach, chaidh iad a-mach. Thog iad an uinneag, chuir iad bata*
>
> *a-staigh, far an robh an duine marbh air an eileadram. Agus thog iad an ceann aige!*
>
> *Ghabh iad eagal am bàis! Bha iad a' smaointinn gu robh an duine a bha marbh a' fàs*
>
> *beò! Theich iad uileadh a-mach às an t-seòmbar!* (MacNeil 2011)

> (Well, after a man would die—well, it's many years now—they would put him on a bier, is what they would call it. There was a coverlet that would be put on it. And the people would be, they would be sitting up all night long, two or three nights, they would be sitting up through the night.

> At this wake, anyway, the people were in the room where he was, the other devils went out, they went out. They lifted the window, they put a stick inside, where the dead man was on the bier, and they lifted his head! They got scared to death! They thought the dead man was coming alive. They all fled out of the room!)

Not surprisingly, official sources strongly condemned such behaviour. Church leaders, in particular, have always stressed the religious nature of the wake over its social function (Lysaght 2003, p. 404). Repressing preexisting customs was an important way the church extended its hegemonic control in places such as Ireland (Taylor 1989, p. 176). Indeed, within the ideological spheres of the church, laughter was condemned across the board (Narváez 1994, p. 285).

The struggle to control the marking of certain rites of passage dates back centuries in Scotland, and continued through the pioneering era in Nova Scotia. As early as 1812, a visiting clergyman wrote that drinking and scandalous behavior at funerals and weddings required action in Judique, Inverness County (Johnston 1960, p. 325). A few years later, Bishop Burke sent out a letter to parishes throughout the diocese warning against the use of alcoholic liquors, particularly at funerals and weddings (Johnston 1960, p. 416). Such a strong rebuke would have made an impression on area residents. Religion was a driving force in this community, central to the lives of both Protestants and Catholics—what two local scholars described as "the single most important influence in the lives of all" (Campbell and MacLean 1974, p. 228).

Public censure may be one of the reasons that so few descriptions of this practice have been recorded in print locally. Those who participated knew better than to broadcast their behaviour. Daniel M. R. MacNeil suggests as much when he recalls a trick played at a wake in Grand Narrows, Cape Breton County: "they kept it a-hide on the older people you know. When Father Angus got a hold of it, he was wild about it!" (MacNeil 2004).

Scholars have explained the tradition of playing tricks and pranks at wakes in various ways, ranging from the pragmatic to the philosophical, from appeasing the dead, to rebuking authority, or to young people simply having fun (Narváez 1994, p. 275). The thread that binds these disparate explanations is that this behavior was not intended to be overtly disrespectful. Instead, it seems best to understand it as a culturally specific response to death that simply grew out of step with social and religious standards that increasingly encroached from outside.

Certainly, there is ample evidence to suggest local residents were willing to make significant sacrifices in order to show respect to the dead. While a horse-drawn carriage or motorized vehicle has been used to transport the body within living memory, historic accounts describe a prohibition against using wheeled transport. This meant that men were responsible for carrying bodies to the graveyard for burial, regardless of the distance, with a piper sometimes employed to lead the way. Judge John G. Marshall recounts a memorable example from 1836:

> A woman in one of the county towns, in the Island of Cape Breton, in her dying hours, solemnly required her husband, to have her body laid beside the graves of her parents in a place distant about 40 miles. He complied with the request and rather a large party set out with the coffin containing the body . . . . It would seem, either from some immediate provocation or old clan or family strife or bad feeling a quarrel while on the way arose between the two parties, which being intensified or rendered more violent by the action of the strong liquor on their own ardent passions, from words they proceeded to blows and for a part of the day kept up a kind of running battle along the road, during which they battered and bruised each other most severely. (Marshall 1866, pp. 68–69)

According to at least one account, the practice of carrying the remains to the graveyard continued into the twentieth century in one part of Inverness County. In keeping with tradition, each time the men carrying the coffin stopped to rest, they built a small stone cairn to mark the occasion (St. Clair 1999, p. 4). This was a custom also observed during the pioneering era in the Keppoch, Antigonish County, where four men stopped on their way to bury John MacKinnon. After sitting down, and saying a prayer, they poured each other a drink of rum. Once refreshed, each placed a stone where the coffin had rested and continued on their way to the graveyard (MacKenzie 2003, p. 51).

During the winter, the effort required to lay the body to rest could be significant. Snow clogged roads and stormy weather frequently made travel difficult. Once the frost had settled into the ground, the labor required to dig a grave was grueling. Often, this required kindling a series of fires, warming the ground enough to be worked, extinguishing the flames, digging down a few more inches, and starting the process again (MacDonald 2020; MacLean 2020). It all proved too much for a group of mourners in Washabuck. After struggling through deep snow to the graveyard in 1918, they were confronted with a seemingly impenetrable barrier of frost in the ground, forcing them to bury the body in the snow, where it remained until the job could be finished in the spring (MacLean 2014, p. 109).

Depending on the circumstances, the desire to be buried alongside family could mean a trip down the road or across borders. Indeed, many people from the region, after having spent the better part of a lifetime away, have been returned to their childhood home for burial. On occasion, this required significant effort. Consider, for instance, the example of Dougald McIsaac. He died while working in Grand Narrows, Cape Breton County. When word of the death reached friends in Broad Cove, Inverness County, nearly a hundred kilometres away, four of them left with a hand-sledge, disinterred his remains, and dragged him through deep snow to be buried back in his home parish (Cameron 1999, p. 141).

Even more impressive is the story of Rev. Alexander MacDonald. When he died in Halifax in 1816, his parishioners chose a group of strong men to take his remains back to Arisaig, Antigonish County. Carrying the body home with them, a distance of two hundred kilometres, the men walked, "night and day, over almost impassible roads, dense forests and swollen rivers" (Pope 1884, p. 51). What is even more remarkable is that when a ship captain offered to sail the body back to Arisaig, the men refused—they did not want any strangers touching their beloved priest.

As these examples demonstrate, the right resting place was important. The weight invested in being buried in land consecrated by the church emerges in a variety of oral traditions. Supernatural legends circulate about restless spirits buried in unconsecrated ground, while oral history records the human cost of enforcing rules about who could be buried in these grounds: women burying unbaptized infants in graves removed from their relatives and the metaphorical embrace of their community, for example. When a religious convert died in nineteenth-century Washabuck, his neighbours were left in a quandary. Having converted in order to marry a Catholic, Angus MacDonald had given up the faith after his wife died. Only a show of force during a clandestine night-time funeral arranged by Catholics ensured that he would find a final resting place among childhood friends in the Protestant graveyard (MacLean 1939, p. 69).

Perceptions of the graveyard were also shaped by folk belief. For example, it was once widely believed that the last person buried in a given graveyard had to look after it until he or she was relieved of the duty by the next person laid to rest there. Hector MacCormack, who lived in Framboise, Richmond County, recalled a variation of this belief that required someone from the family of the last person buried to visit the graveyard every night until another person died and was buried there (Cumming et al. [1984] 2009, p. 148). In this way, the bereaved watched the grave—and their neighbours—until the cycle began anew.

4. Conclusions

Gillian Poulter has explored the growth and development of the funeral industry in Nova Scotia. Her research shows how it transformed the way that people experienced death in the region (Poulter 2011, p. 152). But it seems likely this new approach to death was only able to gain traction because of changes already occurring in the region. By the mid-twentieth century, residents were becoming increasingly aware that certain traditions were considered outdated by some. John Alex John X. MacDonald, who lived in Breton Cove, Victoria County, claimed the death knell for overnight wakes in that area first came from the United States. As members of the community prepared to settle in for the night after final prayers, family members home from Boston ushered them out of the wake house saying, "There's no need of anybody staying up. Because they don't do it away . . . This is all foolishness . . . sitting up with the dead. That's gone down the river" (Caplan 1977, p. 41).

But there were other forces at work too. The growing dominance of a cash economy in a society formerly dominated by communal cooperation had profound consequences for many aspects of the folk tradition. As long as the rural economy was characterized by reciprocity and exchange, the old system worked. But this communal approach to death and mourning grew increasingly incompatible with a population increasingly engaged in wage labor. At the same time, social and economic developments also allowed residents to participate in an expanding commercial economy, partaking in services and amenities—including premade caskets and professional funeral services—that were previously

inaccessible to them. Though their acceptance was not absolute, many residents likely appreciated the freedom this provided them, not only to circumvent certain responsibilities but to avoid participating in a system that required reciprocation. Women, in particular, were freed from the significant work responsibilities associated with hosting the wake at home.

Of course, nothing is as constant as change; the growing popularity of cremation combined with the diminishing role of organized religion are now transforming even more recent responses to death in parts of Nova Scotia settled by Scottish Gaels. As a result, many customs and beliefs described in this article have become foreign in communities where they were once so familiar—and yet, people in the region still come together to mark the death of friends and family in ways where laughter, prayer, and food remain part of the ritual that marks a life well lived. The picture that emerges in this article demonstrates the value of combining oral history with archival research in order to better understand a complex and evolving folk tradition surrounding death, too often misunderstood in, or absent from, the historical record in Gaelic Nova Scotia.

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