

# GRIST FOR THE TOURIST MILL

## Tourists at Gaelic Milling Frolics in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

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### Introduction

Anthropologist and tourism scholar Edward Bruner writes that although tourists and ethnographers are often to be found in the same places, ethnographers too often omit tourists in their writing: “The contemporary omission of tourists is . . . a purposeful ignoring of that which is present but that ethnography finds embarrassing or threatening to its privileged position” (2005: 8). I have been guilty of such an omission in previous research and publications pertaining to Gaelic song culture (e.g. Sparling, 2000; 2003; 2007). Therefore, in this paper, I wish to acknowledge tourists, particularly those who attend Cape Breton milling frolics. Milling frolics are Scottish Gaelic song events that tend to be organized by members of the local Gaelic-speaking community *for* the local Gaelic community, but to which tourists are also welcome.

My goal is to address the notion of who amongst milling frolic attendees can be defined as tourists and on what grounds. It is tempting to define tourists as people who travel some distance to visit an unfamiliar place for a short period of time before returning home. Bruner (after Urry, 1990) labels such visitors as ‘foreign tourists’, whom he further qualifies as people who travel to seek difference. At the same time, Bruner suggests that local attendees may be defined as ‘domestic tourists’ who, rather than difference, seek similarity and reinforcement of their identity and values (2005: 10). However, I will argue that even a recognition of both foreign and domestic tourists is not adequate for understanding who attends milling frolics, for there are local (i.e. ‘domestic’) tourists in attendance who are unfamiliar with Gaelic events and who may therefore be said to seek difference. Meanwhile, some ‘foreign tourists’, especially Gaelic learners, attend Gaelic events in order to engage with a like-minded community of people; they may therefore be said to seek similarity.

My own situation illustrates some of the complexities involved. Given that I am originally from Toronto, a city 2,000 km away from Cape Breton, I may have been considered a foreign tourist when I first attended Cape Breton milling frolics in 1998, but was I still a tourist during my second, third, and subsequent visits? Am I still a foreign tourist now that I live on Cape Breton Island? Such questions reveal a secondary issue addressed by this article, which is the shifting identity of the ethnographer, from outsider to insider, and from foreign tourist to local attendee.

In order to define milling frolic attendees, I first provide a brief introduction to Cape Breton and milling frolics before delineating the different kinds of people who attend these events. I then apply social network theory as a means of characterizing them. My goal is to create a nuanced means of understanding who attends milling frolics, whether local or from away, whether a Gaelic speaker or not.

## Cape Breton Island

Cape Breton is an island of about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> (around 4,000 mi<sup>2</sup>) at the northeastern end of the Maritime Province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Although multicultural, Cape Breton Island is most strongly associated with Scottish culture. Tens of thousands of Gaelic-speaking Highlanders emigrated to Cape Breton between the 1770s and the mid-nineteenth century, largely as a result of the Scottish Clearances.

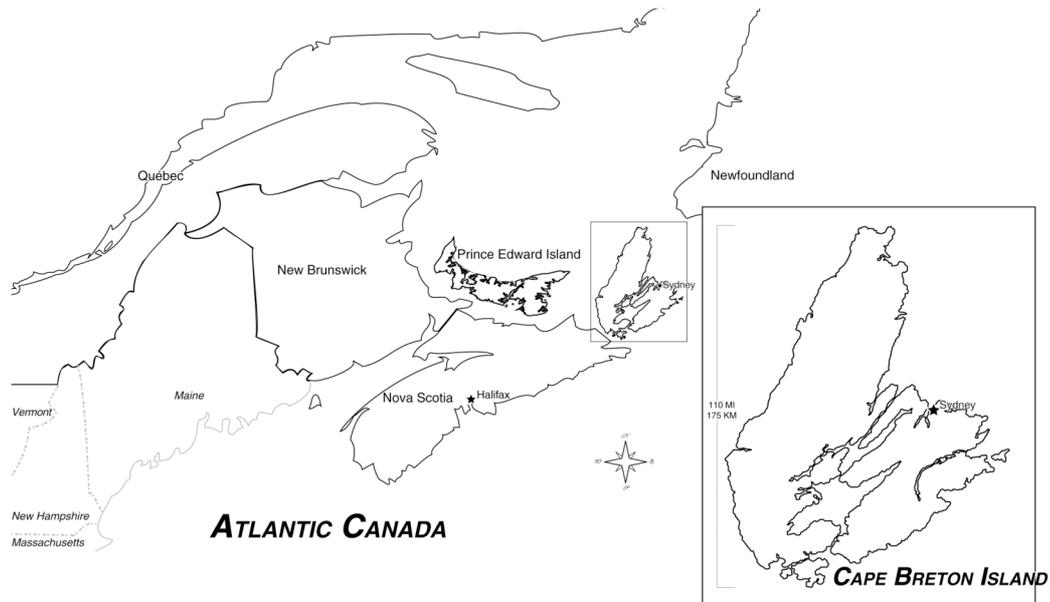


Figure 1 – Map of Cape Breton ( courtesy of Barry Gabriel)

Cape Breton is the only remaining *Gàidhealtachd* (Gaelic-speaking community) outside Scotland. The 1931 Canadian census reported more than 24,000 Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia, most of whom lived on or near Cape Breton (Kelly, 1980: 19; Donovan, 1990: 22). Some might be surprised at how many Gaelic speakers lived in the Maritimes in the early part of the twentieth century, especially since fewer than 500 Gaelic speakers are estimated to remain today (Kennedy, 2001: 74).<sup>1</sup>

With so few Gaelic speakers remaining, there are very few contexts in which Gaelic is regularly used today. It is no longer the language of work, education, religion, or home. One of the very few contexts in which Gaelic is still central is the milling frolic, which is therefore an important cultural event within the Cape Breton Gaelic community. A frolic includes not only native or fluent Gaelic speakers, but also learners and supporters.

## Milling Frolics

Milling frolics feature a group of people beating woven wool cloth around a large table to the accompaniment of Gaelic songs. Originally, the purpose of beating the wool was to ‘shrink’ it, making the cloth warmer and more weather resistant. Such events were local, held in homes over the winter months when weather and short days made indoor chores predominant. Today, wool is still beaten but it is now largely a symbolic act and, instead of new wool being presented at each frolic, a single ‘milling blanket’ is reused over and over again. Contemporary milling frolics also now take place mostly during the summer months in public venues such as a community hall. A small admission is charged, which is usually used to support community initiatives. Each

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participant has the opportunity to take a turn leading a song, singing the verses alone while the rest of the group joins on the choruses. Today, to ensure there will be enough songs to fill a two-hour event, a small number of core singers is often hired. These are people who are fluent Gaelic speakers and active Gaelic singers. They remain at the table throughout a milling frolic, but anyone else may join them. Others take turns, sitting at the table for a few songs before getting up and letting someone else have a turn. Sometimes these others lead a song, other times they simply join in on the choruses. There are usually chairs set up around the milling frolic table where others can watch, listen, and also sing. Just as often, however, the people who surround the table talk quietly amongst themselves—the milling frolic is a social event.<sup>2</sup>

The shift in milling frolic venue and scheduling occurred largely to accommodate Cape Bretoners who had had to move away for economic reasons but who returned during the summer months and who wanted to participate in activities they recalled from their earlier years (MacDonald, 1988–9). At the same time, the public venues and summer schedules made milling frolics more visible and accessible to tourists. In 1965, the North Shore Gaelic Singers, a group of native Gaelic speakers from the North Shore area in Cape Breton, performed at the Newport Folk Festival, raising the profile of Cape Breton Gaelic culture outside the island. By the late 1970s or early 1980s, hotel managers began hiring Gaelic singers to perform for summer guests (MacDonald, 1988–9). The development of cultural tourism on the island has meant greater attention paid to Gaelic cultural activities in tourist literature and events. To this day, milling frolics are freely accessible to tourists as well as locals, although some frolics are more widely known and advertised than others. There are occasionally some that are clearly aimed primarily at tourists, others at locals, but the majority involve a mix of attendees.

### Categorizing Attendees at Milling Frolics

One of the ways in which we might define a tourist event is in determining whether it is for, or at least attended by, tourists. Some events are obviously tourist oriented—designed for tourists with locals rarely in attendance. In Cape Breton, for example, a group called Triskele designed a show to introduce the audience to Scottish-derived music and dance on the island. When I attended in 2000, the audience seemed to comprise mostly of bus tours. These kinds of events seem to receive the most attention in scholarly tourist literature. For example, Bruner (2005), in his book *Culture on Tour*, analyzes major tourist attractions and ethnic theme parks. James Clifford (1997) examines museums and California's Fort Ross while Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) analyzes world exhibitions, Ellis Island and Plimoth Plantation. While locals may visit such sites, they are not places of quotidian life. In Cape Breton, most milling frolics cannot be characterized so easily as tourist events. Although tourists often do attend, audiences can be quite complex. Hypothetically, at least four different kinds of people are likely to be found at a milling frolic, based on observation. The categories will require additional research to verify, because categories are notoriously slippery and often result in a number of exceptions.

First, there are tourists in the generally understood sense: people who are not from the local area, who have had to travel some distance to attend, and who intend to return home after a short duration. Milling frolic tourists may come from other countries, from other parts of Canada or even from mainland Nova Scotia. The key to defining these tourists, however, is that they are not directly linked to community networks and are not considered to be 'part of the community' by locals. These tourists fit Bruner's label of 'foreign tourist' and most likely attend a milling frolic to witness something exotic and different.

Second, there are local Gaelic speakers. They form the core of a milling frolic, ensuring its 'Gaelicness', usually leading most of the songs and sometimes conversing in Gaelic with other attendees. They have usually attended multiple milling frolics. Some Gaelic speakers learned Gaelic as their first language whereas others are adult learners but all are familiar with the language and the milling frolic context and repertoire. These participants fit Bruner's label of

'domestic tourists' in that they do not seek difference, but rather seek a familiar event with familiar people in order to assert and/or reinforce their Gaelic identities.

Third, there are Gaelic speakers and learners 'from away,' to use the Cape Breton term, who have made multiple trips to Cape Breton over a number of years. I counted myself as part of this group until I moved to Cape Breton permanently. Cape Breton is a kind of 'Mecca' for Gaelic learners in North America, and milling frolics are ideal events at which to use one's Gaelic and to observe Gaelic being used by others. Dedicated Gaelic learners tend to return to Cape Breton frequently, often annually, regularly attending the same events. The most popular milling frolics are held annually and Gaelic learners will often schedule their trips to Cape Breton to coincide with these events.

How does one then make sense of these Gaelic speakers and learners from away? They are both foreign and domestic, and seem to seek both similarity and difference. They are foreign in that they are not from Cape Breton, and do not live there. But they are domestic in that they often have friends in the community and know the language and traditions better than some non-Gaelic speaking locals. They seek difference in that Gaelic cultural events are not part of their daily life experiences, but they also seek similarity in that they attend the same events year after year, reinforcing their senses of Gaelic language, culture, and their own Gaelic identities.

Urry (1990: 1) argues that tourism is the consumption of "goods and services which are in some sense unnecessary" which are "different from those typically encountered in everyday life". Difference is key to Urry's definition. There is no doubt that Gaelic events of any type are simply not typical of daily life, even in Cape Breton. Based on Urry's definition, it is easy to argue that foreign visitors attending their first milling frolic are tourists. However, with each subsequent visit to Cape Breton, repeat visitors become less and less like 'typical' tourists. Tamara Kohn suggests that anthropologists of tourism have been too rigid in differentiating between tourists and locals:

*Issues of structure continue to inform a strong dualistic impulse in the anthropology of tourism. That 'hosts' and 'guests', for instance, always divide themselves into discrete units that are vastly different from one another is questionable. . . . The semantic wrestling that we do with identity categories (for example the visitor-local vs the real-local) shows us that our typologies need further unpacking (1997: 14)*

Kohn writes that on the small Hebridean island where she conducted her research, locals used a variety of labels for different kinds of visitors. She critiques Urry's assertion that tourists are "collectors of gazes" who have little interest in repeat visits since she observed, in fact, many people who repeatedly returned to the island and became known locally. Simone Abram agrees that we cannot always neatly divide tourists from locals, guests from hosts:

*...the distinction between locals, visitors, absent family/friends and tourists is . . . blurred. Although examples of each exist, many people fall between these crude categories and make our discussions of tourism problematic and the process of identification and expression of ethnicity complex and multifaceted (1997: 31).*

Finally, the fourth kind of audience member at a milling frolic is someone local who has limited, if any, previous experience with Gaelic language and culture. In many ways, such people are like foreign tourists in that they probably attend milling frolics to experience the uniqueness and exoticness of Gaelic, but they do not travel far to do so. Such attendees may feel a certain connection to Gaelic culture through heritage and inheritance, perhaps because a grandparent was a Gaelic speaker. Unlike Bruner's domestic tourists who seek 'similarity,' these local attendees are more like Bruner's 'foreign' tourists who seek difference.

My sketch of four rough categories of milling frolic attendees suggests that defining a tourist is perhaps more complicated than some of the tourism literature might suggest. We cannot simply speak of foreign and domestic tourists, or speak of a simple quest for difference or similarity. One

way to avoid this problem is to shift the definition of a tourist from one's *purpose* or *motivation* in attending a particular event or site, and instead focus on the *social networks* in which a person is embedded.

## Defining Tourists

When I speak of shifting the definition of a tourist away from one's purpose or motivation it is a response to three definitions of tourists presented in three important scholarly works. In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, sociologist MacCannell (1989 (1976)) defines tourists as those who seek authenticity, but who are forever foiled in their efforts. In *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, Urry (1990) argues that tourists are motivated to seek difference from their everyday lives. Bruner (2005) agrees with Urry with respect to foreign tourists, but suggests that a second category, domestic tourists, seek similarity. Thus, MacCannell's tourists futilely seek authenticity, Urry's tourists seek difference and Bruner's domestic tourists seek similarity and reaffirmation. In the case of the milling frolic, however, it is difficult to divide audiences into categories of foreign and domestic, insider and outsider, those seeking difference and those seeking similarity.

It may be easier to analyze the milling frolic audiences by examining the extent of one's sense of obligation to, or investment in, a particular event or community. For example, when I recently visited Boston for the first time, I was a foreign tourist with no particular connections to the community. It was an unfamiliar city to explore and discover, rather than a familiar place to rediscover. I paid admission prices with the expectation of being provided with an experience. My repeated fieldwork trips to Cape Breton were quite different. When I paid admission prices in Cape Breton, I was not just paying for an experience but also contributing to the Gaelic community, a community I care about and of which I consider myself a part. I felt—and continue to feel—a sense of obligation and duty to attend Gaelic events in order to support my friends, my community, the language, and the culture. My actions in Cape Breton were mitigated by my relationships with the people there.

Dorothy Noyes, a folklorist, advocates the use of social network theory when analyzing groups. She argues that:

*The network lets us get rid of those boundaries, so theoretically troublesome, and gives us a structure for talking about long-distance and mediated relationships. It addresses our concerns with multivocality and complexity by understanding actors as both interrelated and uniquely positioned agents; it prevents us from making a priori assumptions about meaning or origins by demanding that we examine the content and character of any given set of relationships (1995: 465–466).*

In other words, social network theory allows us to move beyond defining people in binary terms and instead focuses on how many relationships one has with others in a particular network, the quality or nature of those relationships, and the position one holds vis-à-vis 'the centre' of the network. Methodologically, to analyze a social network, one starts with an individual and traces all of his or her social relationships, then traces the relationships between those connections and adds all of *their* relationships and connections (Noyes, 1995: 457). To analyze the network, one might consider:

1. The number of one's immediate acquaintances. Locals are more likely to have many acquaintances whereas first-time visitors are lucky if they have any at all. Repeat visitors are likely to be found somewhere in between.
2. The density of the network. The more one's acquaintances know one's other acquaintances, the denser the network. Gaelic speakers are likely to have the densest networks, as the Gaelic community is relatively small and members are generally well-known to each other. Non-Gaelic speakers, whether local or 'from away', are more likely to have sparser networks.

3. The degree of an individual's centrality or peripherality. An individual is more central the more everyone in the network knows that individual, which typifies Gaels who have been active in the Gaelic community for some time. Meanwhile, newcomers tend to be peripheral, depending upon a small number of intermediaries for access.

One might also assess the nature or quality of the ties between individuals (Noyes, 1995: 457-458) in terms of:

1. Multiplexity. A relationship is multiplex when it is based on more than a single factor. Cape Breton Gaels tend not only to know each other through Gaelic cultural events, but are also often related and/or are neighbours. Those from away are generally less likely to have multiplex relationships with their acquaintances in the network.
2. The frequency of a tie. Local Gaels are generally able to interact more frequently than those who come from away, although repeat visitors re-enact ties more frequently than one-time attendees, whether local or not.
3. The duration of a tie. For members born in the Gaelic community, ties may be lifelong. For one-time visitors, the duration of the tie is short. Gaelic learners from away gradually build their ties; consequently, the quality of the network changes with each year that they remain involved.
4. Power differentials. First-time visitors may be considered (by themselves or by Cape Breton Gaels) as customers while milling frolic singers are providers of Gaelic culture. But as someone returns, he or she is likely to shift from sitting in the audience to taking part at the table, perhaps eventually leading a song or two. The nature of their relationships to others in the network changes. At the same time, Gaelic learners, no matter how proficient, are almost always viewed as students who ought to learn from any native Gaelic speakers present.

## Conclusions

By redefining tourists as those who have the sparsest, most peripheral, least multiplex, least frequent, and shortest network connections instead of basing the definition on one's purpose in attending an event or site (or, for that matter, on the distance one must travel to get to an event or site, another common definition for a tourist), the term 'tourist' becomes more flexible and more useful in the milling frolic context. Tourists can be foreign *or* domestic; they are defined by their limited connections to Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Meanwhile, repeat visitors from away—and, indeed, ethnographers—are no longer labelled as tourists given their places in the Cape Breton Gaelic social network. Or, if they are still labelled tourists, the label is qualified. Tying a definition of tourists to social networks creates a continuum, which is more responsive to the reality of varying perspectives. Not everyone at a given event or site will agree on who constitutes a tourist and who does not. First-time visitors to a milling frolic may view anyone who sits at the milling table as a non-tourist, as someone who seems 'connected' to the event and to others in attendance. However, native Gaelic speakers and Cape Bretoners may consider unfamiliar Gaelic learners as tourists, even though they may have more connections to the community than first time, non-Gaelic speaking, local attendees.

When studying milling frolics as tourist events, evaluating who attends and who one should consider a tourist is only the tip of the iceberg. Given time and space, I would explore *why* Cape Breton Gaels admit tourists and *how* tourists are accommodated. I'm intrigued by how and why those deemed to be outsiders are carefully—but subtly—excluded from milling frolics, as well as the potential consequences of such an exclusion. But at this point I have at least started to address the complex, heterogeneous audiences found at milling frolics. Rather than attempt to differentiate between tourists and locals using criteria such as distance travelled or motivations for attendance it seems more productive to consider the ways in which milling frolic attendees are integrated (or not) into the event, as well as into the larger Cape Breton Gaelic community. It seems clear to me that most attendees have a strong sense of who is central and who is

peripheral, and social network theory allows an assessment of how and where individuals are positioned in the event, and on what basis.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The number is considerably less according to the 2001 Canadian census. Based on a 20% sampling rate, there are 265 people in Cape Breton with Gaelic as a first language (mother tongue), 655 who speak it (to what degree is unspecified), and none who use it in the home (Statistics Canada, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> It is easiest to appreciate a milling frolic by seeing one. Therefore, I recommend that interested readers search for 'milling', 'waulking' (the term used in Scotland), or 'Gaelic song' on *YouTube.com* for video clips.

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