

The Fiddle Burning Priest of Mabou  
Jodi McDavid

McDavid writes about a priest who lived in the Mabou area of Inverness County, Cape Breton. She talks about the legend that surrounds this particular priest. There are several stories about who the priest was, what he was known for and the role he would play in a local environment. These come from several different kinds of sources, and include academic articles, master thesis, oral histories of the region and CD liner notes. By using these sources McDavid is able to get an idea of why this priest is remembered in Mabou so long after his death. She gains stories about what the priest did, who he interacted with and what the priesthood was doing around this time.

Legend: According to [americanfolklore.net](http://americanfolklore.net) a legend is a traditional tale handed down from earlier times and believed to have an historical basis.

The context of this paper is of the History and culture of Cape Breton. Every region of Cape Breton has its own local history, and Mabou is an area that has a different history than any other area on Cape Breton. One of the major things that makes Cape Breton a unique and interesting cultural area is the pride and nationalism that is present on the island. There is a very real sense of difference, and especially of being different from the Mainland. A reason that Mabou is particularly important to Cape Breton is its link to Scottish immigrants and the culture they brought here with them. Many of these settlers planted seeds in the area of Mabou, and their culture and lives started to transform the area into a “cultural mecca” of Cape Breton. Today it has become the seat of much of the commoditised and exploited musical and Scottish culture that has been used by provincial governments to “sell” the island in general. The history and culture of Cape Breton, and Mabou in particular, are what frames this paper.

Much of this paper revolves around the legend and stories of Father Kenneth. He was the first pastor of Port Hood and Mabou in 1865, and kept this post until he retired from the priesthood in 1894. The legends that surround Father Kenneth stem largely from his dislike of fiddles, dances and other get-togethers of the local people. It seems that music was the most targeted evil in Mabou, and Father Kenneth was especially known for confiscating fiddles of the locals so that they could not play them at dances and other functions. It was said that he would confiscate the fiddles from the musicians and burn them because of his belief that they led to alcohol consumption and other evils. The written works about Father Kenneth do provide evidence that the legends are likely true, but it also shows that the oral tradition of the area played a part in the transmission of the stories about the Father. There are many stories about Father Kenneth and how he worked within the parish, but he is most well known for the legends of his burning fiddles, and his objection to drinking and picnics.

One of the reason that McDavid believes Father Kenneth’s legend has remains so popular is because of the fiddling tradition that exists in Mabou. She believes that because of the strong fiddling tradition in Mabou that these stories have become part of an occupational folklore. This occupational folklore allows the fiddlers to tell a story of a time when their art was being put down, and when there was an attempt to destroy the fiddling tradition in the area. It is possible that having a folklore about the attempted destruction of your chosen art is a way to gain some sympathy and appreciation for the ability and art itself. Having such a story allows the listener to appreciate what they are hearing even more, and can make the growth or sustainability of that art even greater.

Throughout the paper McDavid talks about the importance of the priest and the fiddle within the context of Cape Breton. These two devices play important functions within the society of the island.

The priest has many functions within a given area, and Father Kenneth fulfilled many of these. Priests were an integral part of the community, and this was especially true in more rural areas like Mabou. The priests first function was to provide the population with religious guidance and fulfillment. By leading mass, confession and helping people with problems the priest would make sure that the religious desire of the community was filled. One of the largest things that Father Kenneth did to help complete this function was fundraising and preparing to build a new church for his worshipers. Being a guide for the people of a community was also an important function of the priest. As McDavid writes, the priest fulfilled many of the duties that elected officials now preside over. They settled disputes, created legal documents and could even help with further education. Sometimes this did bring priests into

the political sphere of life, and this was no different for Father Kenneth. During elections he was a priest who would try and make his congregation vote for a certain political party, and in this case it would be the Conservative Party. So not only did the Father help with local fundraising, the religious need of the community, and the guidance of community members, but he also tried to persuade them to do what was “best” for the area.

The priest is not the only cultural object that has a function to fulfill. The fiddle also has many functions within the culture of Cape Breton. The fiddle is a symbol, and represents many things for Cape Bretoners. It stands for the old country, the new country, for family, tradition, the working class, hardship, status and counter-hegemonic power. It represents these things to the people who use, listen to and hold the fiddle. For them it is a part of their lives and stories; it is a part of their culture. The fiddle has a connection to the honest, hardworking lifestyle that has become synonymous with rural Cape Breton. It can be used for work, relaxation or enjoyment, and affects everyone in a different way. Some people get up and dance when they hear the fiddle, and others sit quietly and listen for the unique sounds of their favourite notes. The fiddle functions as a driver and stabilizer of culture. It allows the culture in rural Cape Breton to survive as a unique and different thing. Without the fiddle, as Father Kenneth would have liked, the culture of the people close to the fiddle would have been vastly different than it is today. While the fiddle may be too commercially used in Nova Scotia, it still holds a place close to those who relish its cultural and communal importance.

McDavid’s paper on the fiddle burning priest offers the reader an insight into the workings of a rural Cape Breton area. It allows the reader to see the functions of the priest and the fiddle. It shows that without these two factors the culture of these areas would be very different. While Father Kenneth was against the fiddle being played, he was an instrumental part of the community because of his religious guidance and help that was spread throughout the area. His legends have become part of the oral tradition of the region, and thus have become part of the occupational folklore of the local fiddlers. The fiddle also plays an important role within this story. It is something that brings people together, gives them a common starting point and allows culture to grow. Without the intermingling and presence of both of these forces there would be less of a unique culture within Mabou.