



# MCDAVID'S "FIDDLE BURNING PRIEST OF MABOU"

FOLK 211 – Atlantic Canadian Folklore

2011-03-30



# WHAT DID *YOU* THINK?

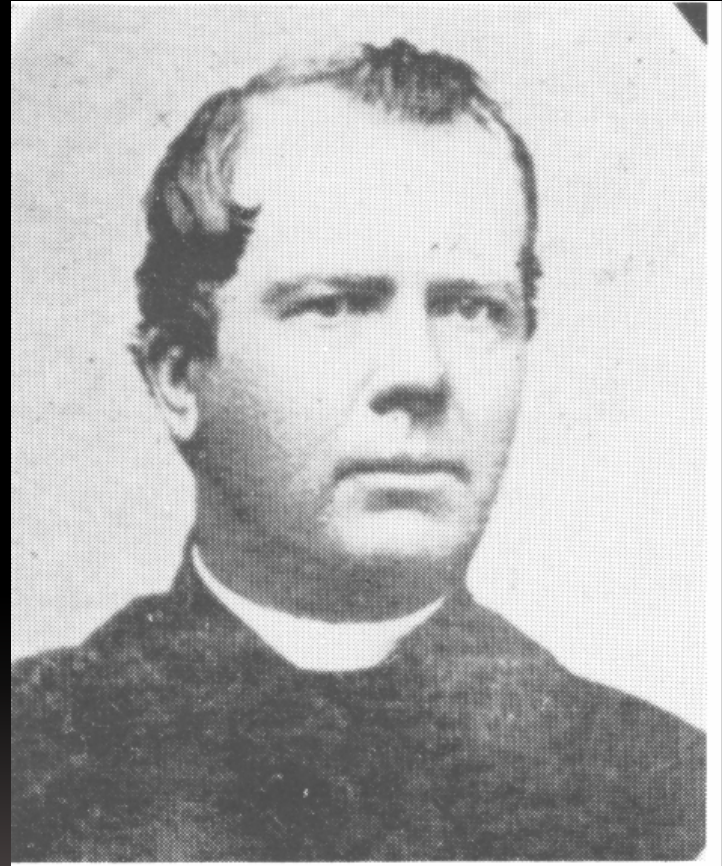
... and how do Robert and Caelin wish to proceed?

# Concerns a narrative in active circulation

- How many in class had heard this, or a variation of this?
- It exists in multiple forms, and has crossed into oral history, occupational folklore of musicians, popular culture, etc.
- Part of a body of narratives concerning ambivalent attitudes towards the power of the priest
- “The Priest” as a character features prominently in folk literature
  - But “the named priest” – specifically identified historical persons - appear primarily in gossip or historical legends.

# Fr. Kenneth Joseph MacDonald

- Born in Antigonish County, NS, 1821
- St. FX College in Arichat, 1853 at 32
- Grand Seminary of Quebec, 1854-56
- Ordained 1856



# Fr. MacDonald (cont.)

- Accounts detail him as:
  - a strict disciplinarian
  - a social advocate
  - against alcohol
  - against picnics
  - withholding services
  - manipulating votes
    - "...One Mabou man was known to fear almost nothing. One day another man asked him, 'Donald aren't you afraid of anything?' To which Donald replied, 'Yes, I'm afraid of two things: Fr Kenneth and thunder!'" -Nilsen

# Legend basics...

- Action of the Priest:
  - Fr. Kenneth confiscates, burns, hoards, banishes, or breaks fiddles
- Reaction of the Fiddlers:
  - Fiddlers give them up, hide them, trick him, (or their actions are unstated [kernel narrative])
- Coda
  - The tradition lives on: several fiddlers are living proof of his failures



# Aspects of the legend are familiar...

- Fiddlers or fiddle music are commonly linked to the devil
- Fiddlers play with these ideas, even today, with song titles such as “Devil in the Kitchen”
- Entire tradition of fiddling retains counter-hegemonic tone

# Did Fr. Kenneth have a point?

- Thompson quotes informant:
  - "...there was a barn there flat on the ground, and the house was ready, too, it was old, and had an awful lean to it, but there was people living in it, there was clothes on the line. And Neil said to my father, "there must be a good fiddler live there, Dan" he said. Everything was falling down"



# Did he fear competition?

- Good dancers, singers, musicians and those who could fight well at weddings were also spoken about, and stories of the priests who labored so zealously in the parishes of Mabou, Broad Cove, Port Hood, Cheticamp and Judique also formed a part of our fireside chats. (Rankin 3)
- Binary opposition of priest and fiddler?

# In conclusion....

- Anticlericalism
  - Standard historical term for intense reaction and hostility to the power of the priest (specifically Catholic and Anglican)
- Counter-clericalism
  - McDavid's term for the ongoing negotiation through folklore forms of this tension
  - Counterclericalism can burst forth into Anticlericalism, but just as often doesn't



# Go away now

- Oh my lord! Nothing for next class! Tearful farewells, details of the take home exam, course evaluations.