



# A Stone on Their Cairn,

A Cape Breton Saga  
By Kevin MacLeod

Review by Alexa Thompson

I had an opportunity during Celtic Colours Festival to spend some time with new novelist Kevin MacLeod for whom the elation of being “published” has not yet worn off. “I walked into a bookstore and there was my book,” he told me. After he’d stared at it for a while, a sales assistant asked if she could help him. “No,” he told me he replied. “I wrote that book!”

**A**STONE ON THEIR CAIRN (Clach Air An Càrn) is a mesmerizing tale of the settlers of the fictional Loch Dubh, not far from Baddeck on Cape Breton Island. It covers the period from Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 to 1914 and the outbreak of World War I. In this quiet Scottish enclave the lives of everyday folk

unfold. The women are the backbone of the community, fiercely holding onto their families — bearing their children, raising their children and, in some cases, burying their children. There are the high notes: a wedding brings a new person into the community, the birth of a child, festivals and the inevitable ceilidhs, held despite the disapproval of the community

minister. There is sadness as one mother’s son is killed in action fighting in the Boer War. (It is a cairn built in his memory that provides the story with its title.) There is an abortion and the minister’s daughter has to go to Boston to have an illegitimate baby. One beautiful child is born blind, but gifted, after her mother contracts German measles during pregnancy. And there is some intolerance as one young man proposes to wed the village schoolteacher, a Catholic from Christmas Island way. In short, there is everybody you might encounter had you stumbled across Loch Dubh around the turn of the 20th century. There is even a map of the village and, given the number of villagers, a genealogy of local families.

What makes this tale different is the use

of Gaelic speech. Author Kevin MacLeod wanted his story to be as authentic as possible, and as he says, “You can’t tell this story only in English.” Gaelic would have been the language of the adults, though the children would be learning English in school, and Catriona Parsons has done a tremendous job of flawlessly introducing, and then translating, many well used Gaelic phrases.

Basically this is the story of rural Cape Breton caught up in a tiny, independent community. Its focus is on the little, everyday things of life set against a Victorian/Edwardian backdrop. So although the people will come together to celebrate something world-wide, such as the celebrations across the Commonwealth for the Queen’s Jubilee, they will also attend their children’s Christmas concert, something parents still do today.

Kevin MacLeod, though a native Cape Bretoner, seems an unlikely author as his day job is as Chief of Protocol for the Federal Department of Canadian Heritage, a career that has had him socializing with royalty and a long way from Loch Dubh. He is the only Canadian invested by the Queen as first a Member of the Victoria Order (MVO), then Lieutenant (LVO) and lastly Commander (CVO) — the highest level available for a Canadian — for services rendered to the sovereign.

The idea for writing a novel had been floating around in his mind since the early 1980s. He wanted to understand the world of his grandparents, Gaelic speakers, who were born in the age of the settlers at Loch Dubh, and to capture the richness of a culture, warts and all, that is now all but gone. It is all here — piety, pain, stubbornness, fighting, drinking, loving.

He sees his book as a series of vignettes, or mini-stories, that reflect real society. “My view of life is episodic. Several things are different about this book and I knew I was taking a gamble. Each chapter has four or five little stories. It’s like a quilt block. Each block fits together with other blocks and I realize that that’s what makes society tick.”

MacLeod’s people come from the treeless Hebridean island of Harris and he often wonders what they thought as they sailed past the forested shores of St. Ann’s Bay. He was raised in nearby Boularderie Island.

In the summer of 1997, the author was in Cape Breton on a business trip with a young Jewish colleague who had never before visited the island and was stunned by its “Celticness”. But it wasn’t until Saturday, August 31, 1997, that he began on the first draft, writing well into the night. So it wasn’t until quite late the next morning that he turned on the radio and learned of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. MacLeod had taken

care of her during a trip to Canada in 1991 and was deeply impressed with her. “She was a formidable mother,” he said. “Her children were devoted to her.”

Writing continued through to May 1998; often he was so absorbed in a story line, such as the death of Andrew in South Africa, <http://www.celticlife.ca/site/> that he lost track of time. Other times writing could be a struggle. The next two years were spent polishing the story, correcting grammatical errors and inconsistencies in the text. Then it was time to present the completed manuscript to a publisher.

A friend told him when he started writing that writing was the easy part; finding a publisher was the hard bit. That friend was right. Countless publishers politely returned the manuscript until he came across Richard Rogers of Glen Margaret Publishing while in Nova Scotia to brief the new Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable Mayann E. Francis. Glen Margaret is a publishing company for those who are self-publishing. While the author is responsible for costs, the company promotes and distributes books that meet its high publishing standards. For Richard Rogers, whose wife Grayce edited the manuscript, *A Stone on Their Cairn* was well worth taking on.

(*A Stone on Their Cairn* is available in bookstores. More information and reviews of the novel are available at the author’s website, [www.kevinmacleod.ca](http://www.kevinmacleod.ca).)



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