

50 years of Breton Books and Cape Breton's Magazine

Ronald Caplan's persistence pays off for the people of Cape Breton

by Norma Jean MacPhee

With a thirst for stories and the passion, dedication and patience to give them a home, Ronald Caplan has been capturing and sharing stories of Cape Breton for 50 years.

Caplan was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. He moved to Cape Breton's North Shore on a whim and the urging of friend in 1972.

"I wasn't here very long before I knew I had really found an exceptional place," says Caplan. "In terms of interesting people, their kindness, generosity and interesting backgrounds."

Caplan had read a book about the Fox Farm movement out of the Appalachians and its magazine about farming life. "I thought someone should do that in Cape Breton," says Caplan.

"In one day driving from Wreck Cove to the Englishtown Ferry I designed the magazine in my head."

Cape Breton's Magazine was first published in 1972. During the next 25 years, Caplan recorded stories, took photographs and secured ads for 74 issues.

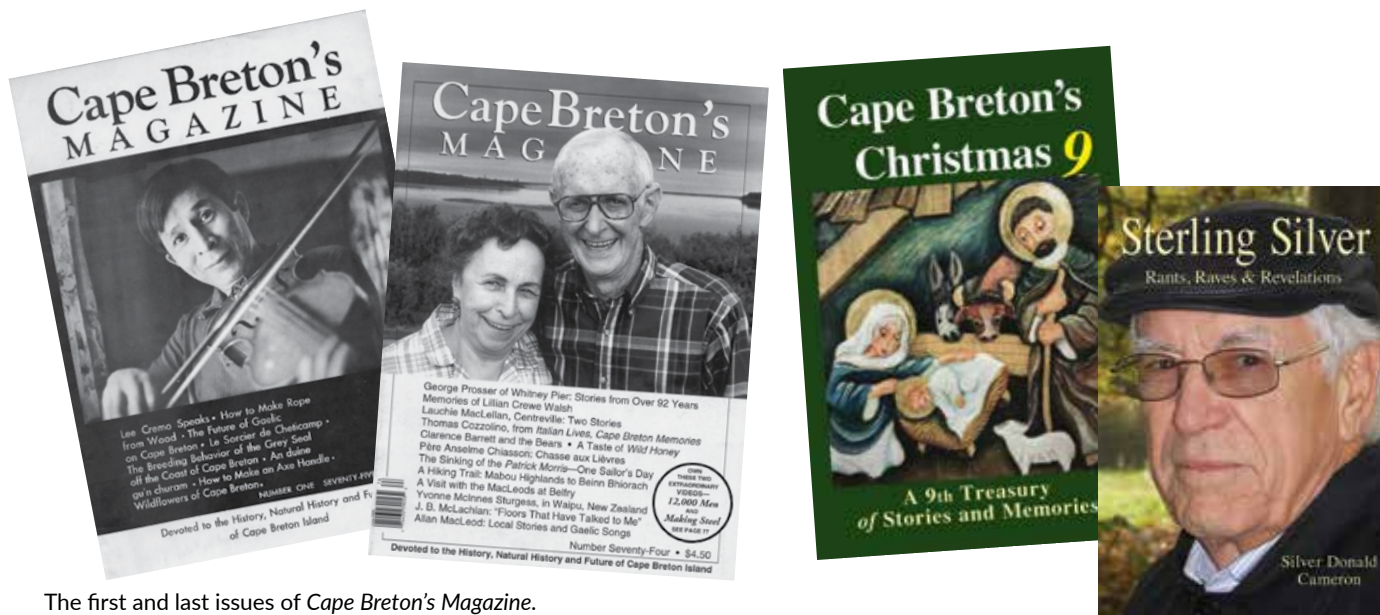
He started meeting with people and collecting stories in his nearby neighbourhood of Wreck Cove.

"How fortunate I was that I knew so little that nobody took it for granted I knew the answer to the questions I was asking," says Caplan. "I was a genuine explorer and people were kind to share things with me in detail, getting me to see what was going on, the context for whatever the subject was."

Caplan says he wanted the new magazine to be the largest on the newsstand, a goal he achieved. To this day, in many living rooms, rec rooms and antique stores you'll find copies of the large 10 x 14 inch distinctive *Cape Breton's Magazine*.

Its newsprint quality paper and black-and-white printing were the cheapest route. He invested his money in a good quality cover, a decision which boded well for its lasting quality.

"The stories I was hearing were remarkable, they were a new world for me," says Caplan. "I guess I was also driven or determined to share them—save them first of all, and then out of



The first and last issues of *Cape Breton's Magazine*.

respect for those people who had shared their stories with me, to share them with the wider world.”

When asked how he felt with that first issue in his hand, Caplan laughs and says, “Well, that’s a funny story.” Excited with his very first issue ready to go, Caplan filled his van with magazines to drop off at stores.

When he walked into a store in Glace Bay, “The fella took a look at it and said, ‘Buddy, you’ve made a terrible mistake,’ and he did not put my magazine on his shelf,” says Caplan with a chuckle. “All I can say is 50 years later, his store is long gone.”

The tagline on the cover of *Cape Breton's Magazine* says “Devoted to the History, Natural History and Future of Cape Breton Island.” From tales of bald eagles to Waltes, a Mi’kmaq game, to women in the Steel Plant, Caplan allowed those stories to tell themselves, in the voices of the person of focus. He provided the interest to draw them out of people and the venue for others to enjoy and learn from them.

“First you get a knife of proper steel.” That’s the opening line from the article about my grandfather Lauchie Gillis.

When preparing for this article, my mom reminded me that her father had been featured back in 1973. She kept a copy of that edition and dug it out. The article is called “Lauchie C. Gillis, Skinning a Lamb.” The first 15 lines are about the importance of using the correct knife. Such definitive, precise knowledge allowed to breathe in the space of the story.

Seeing the many pictures of my grandfather, who died when I was a baby, and hearing his words, provided a fascinating glimpse into his life. The now soft, brittle pages of the newsprint held so much history.

“He made the everyday person an extraordinary person,” says Mary Munson of Caplan. Munson is a journalist and author of *The Fairies of Cape Breton*, a book recently published by Breton Books.

Since creating Breton Books in 1986, Caplan has edited and published more than 200 books devoted to Cape Breton topics and Cape Breton writers.

Munson first met Caplan when she submitted a story for one of the Cape Breton Christmas anthologies he publishes. “That’s when I got to know his talent as he was able to get so much more out of me,” says Munson.

“I can’t figure out his energy level,” laughs Munson. “His passion keeps him going, his passion for where he lives and his passion for what he calls home.”

In terms of the editing process of her book, Munson says she thoroughly enjoyed it. “He has a great sense of fun, a sense of humour. He knew how to draw things out of me, he had faith in me and he was a joy to work with.”

Bill Culp is another of Breton Book’s latest authors. Culp’s book *Have Guitar Will Travel* came out in the fall of 2021.

A travelling musician for decades, when the pandemic hit, he didn’t know what to do with his days. He started writing a book about his experiences in the music business. With the pages swiftly flowing, Culp soon had the makings of a book.

“I just picked up the phone and called Ron,” says Culp. “I knew it probably didn’t fit within the scope of what he traditionally published, there wasn’t anything about an 80s rock and roller who lived in Cape Breton during a pandemic.”

Culp is grateful Caplan took on his book and he appreciated all the energy and time Caplan provided. “It became a much, much better book as a result of his input,” says Culp.

“I thought it was just going to be a fun rock and roll book—kinda light and fluffy—but he forced me to reach deeper. I just told the story from the heart, so it’s not just a rock and roll story, it’s the story of someone’s life.”

Telling the story of Cape Breton lives has been the mantra of Caplan’s life work, providing a venue and a home for thousands of stories.

Breton Books, like *Cape Breton's Magazine* before it, tells stories as varied as the people across Cape Breton. From Rita Joe’s poems to Wanda Robson’s account of her sister Viola Desmond to Father Jimmy Tompkins, the books provide glimpses into many lives and histories of the island.

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“It’s a gem of a collection—*Cape Breton’s Magazine* and Breton Books—it’s a treasure that will definitely be well used and enjoyed into the future,” says Richard MacKinnon, Vice President Academic and Provost at Cape Breton University. MacKinnon’s also a folklore professor with decades of experience studying storytelling and its impacts.

“It’s a national if not internationally significant collection of material that represents a story of a whole island,” says MacKinnon. “The stories we tell are pretty important about who we are and how we perceive ourselves in the world.

“He sought out those people, the storytellers of the communities, whether it be in Cape North or Wreck Cove or Grand Mira South. Those stories are about resilience and the tough, hard times. Good times but also a lot of lessons we can learn... There’s not many places in the world that have that kind of history available.”

All 74 issues of *Cape Breton’s Magazine* are archived at CBU in the Beaton Institute and also online.

MacKinnon grew up in the mining town of New Waterford and remembers reading accounts Caplan gathered from surviving family members of a mine explosion that happened in 1923, killing 63 men and boys.

“I remember being a university student and being quite moved by that, this is my town and I knew the names of the people he talked to. It was quite a moving piece of history, giving me connections to my community. I think a lot of people had that same experience when they would open up the magazine or look at some of the books, it connects people to their community and their past.”

While teaching his folklore courses, MacKinnon would often search the many stories saved in *Cape Breton’s Magazine* to gather material for his students. “I still go back now,” says MacKinnon. “If I’m working on a project, I’ll think, what’s Ron already done on this, and I’ll go have a look.

“There’s probably not a topic in Cape Breton that Ron hasn’t touched on at some point, so it’s really a good starting point for any researcher.”

Those complexities build our sustainability as a people. And through those stories, that heart and grit, a reminder that we’re not alone in our struggles or our triumphs.

Ron Caplan’s resumé glistens with prestigious awards including the Order of Canada and Nova Scotia’s Cultural Life Award, along with other folklore and oral history accolades. He doesn’t do it for any of that.

“I believed in the power of these stories. I believed in gathering these stories. And I believed they should be shared.” ■

NORMA JEAN MacPHEE is a freelance journalist in Cape Breton with a passion for laughter, nature, books, fine food and finer people.