

Gaelic Children's Camp in several NS communities

- by John Gillis

Several Nova Scotian communities were involved during the past three weeks in hosting Gaelic Children's Camps. About forty or so children attended each week and participated in activities such as games, singing songs, dancing and crafts all done through the medium of Gaelic. The program was held in communities such as Christmas Island, Iona, and St. Andrew's, near Antigonish and the camp in West Mabou ran from July 24 to July 28 at the West Mabou Hall.

Thirteen people from the west coast of Scotland, including mothers who are educators, and a grandmother also attended. There were opportunities for adults and parents to improve Gaelic language skills as well. "Visiting children, aged 10 months to 13 years are joining the local kids for this unique Gaelic learning experience. The camps are family oriented and parents are encouraged to be involved. This isn't like

a drop-off program," said Frances MacEachen, Gaelic cultural officer for the Province of Nova Scotia, based in Mabou.

Feis Mhabu is hosting the project. Feis representatives say there are a growing number of children in the Mabou area exposed to Gaelic in the home, at Feis events: and at school. They say this will give them a chance to connect with kids in another part of the world who speak the same language and share the same culture.

The Scottish teachers led three sessions: a parent and tot group for preschool children, one for ages 5-7 and one for kids 8-12. Catriona MacIntyre, early childhood education officer with Highland Council, conducted Gaelic lessons for parents while the children activities took place. In all, more than two hundred parents, children and community volunteers participated in the project.

"The support from the communities here in Nova Scotia has been fabulous.

There's been so much commitment, and there's a real sense of community spirit here. We hope these activities and links between families continue to grow," said MacIntyre.

For Morag MacLellan, a senior citizen and grandmother from Moidart, Scotland, this is her first visit to Nova Scotia, and she's here with her daughter and four grandchildren. MacLellan's first language is Gaelic. "It's been such a wonderful experience all around. We've been very much welcomed into the communities and here in Mabou, and I've had the opportunity to visit and speak Gaelic with a number of people. Their Gaelic is very close to my own," she added. MacLellan says is encouraged by what she has seen in Nova Scotia and by the fact that learning opportunities in the schools have much improved in Scotland in recent decades.

Morag Burke, a musician and educator who runs a Gaelic program for youth in St. Andrew's near Antigonish, said she was extremely

impressed with how easily the children from Scotland and from Nova Scotia integrated. "They met and right away they began to play and socialize and fit in together," she said on a break between workshops in West Mabou amidst a cacophony of activity.

For Sheena Marie Halfpenny, a nineteen-year-old student in the Celtic Studies program at St. EX. University, her three-week employment period with the program has provided a tremendous hands-on learning opportunity. "I've been working with some very experienced Gaelic educators, and this experience ties into my long-term goals. I want to take an education degree in Gaelic at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, and I hope that there will be employment opportunities for me here in Nova Scotia when I return," she says.

The Feis Mhitbu executive is pleased with the links and the programs developed and run in the past few years, but they are always looking to make improvements.

"We're encouraged by the fact there has been support at the government level, but we're still challenged by an understanding of what Gaelic is. We've run these camps and programs for some time now, and we believe the next step may be to develop an after school program," said Bernadette (Campbell) MacEachen.

"We're really getting a chance now to form these links with families and with Scotland, and we can build on these experiences and this expertise that these educators can bring to Gaelic children's playgroups and language activities. I believe what we've learned is that the future of Gaelic children's programs must come from the parents," Bernadette added.

The project is supported by the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage and Highland Council, Scotland, as a joint initiative under a memorandum of understanding signed between the two areas to strengthen Gaelic language and culture on both sides of the Atlan-

tic. An estimated 50,000 Gaels emigrated from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to Nova Scotia between 1770 and 1840, establishing communities that mirrored their Scottish homes of origin in terms of dialect of Gaelic spoken, song traditions, music and kinship. A sense of Gaelic identity is strong on both sides of the ocean.

A closing children's concert was held July 28th at the West Mabou Hall, and many of the families participating in the program in other Nova Scotian communities were planning to attend a farewell social event on the beach prior to the Scottish group's departure.

For more information on Gaelic language and cultural programming contact: Frances MacEachen, Gaelic cultural officer, Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage, *p.a.* Box 261, Mabou, NS BOE IXO or telephone (902) 945-2114.