

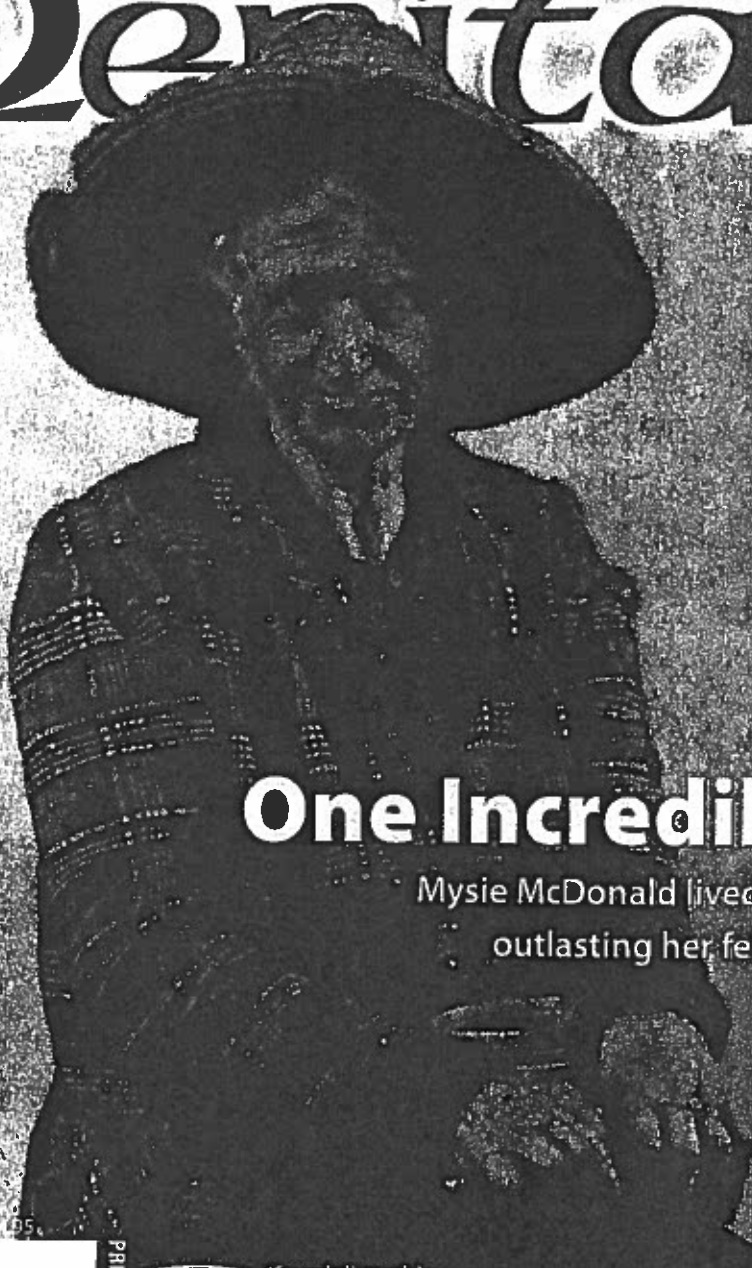
Lament for the  
Tree of Strings



The Shetland  
Fiddler

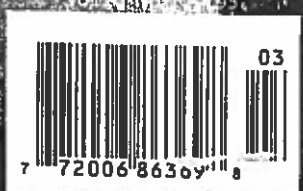
# Celtic Heritage

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## One Incredible Scot

Mysie McDonald lived alone in the woods,  
outlasting her fellow Scottish settlers



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1828 - 1906

# One Incredible Scot

Mysie McDonald lived alone in the woods,  
outlasting her fellow Scottish settlers

Sharon Bird Anderson



Mysie McDonald, Photo courtesy of  
the New Brunswick Public Archives

In 1890, Mysie McDonald, slung her dead brother over her shoulders, and walked barefoot approximately 11 miles from her home in the deserted Old Scotch Settlement to the Catholic Cemetery in Stanley, New Brunswick. After her brother was buried, Mysie, 62, became the last remaining inhabitant of a small Canadian community founded by Scottish settlers. She lived alone in the woods for 16 years, becoming famous for her self-sufficiency and eccentricity. She trapped animals, fished, picked nuts and made brooms. Perhaps it was because of her strength that she was feared by some, and rumours spread that she was a witch. It is undeniable that she had a stubborn will to live and knew how to make use of her wild surroundings. She was a survivor with a strong faith. She could not pass a church of any denomination without slipping into a back pew and listening to the remainder of a service. Afterward, she discreetly let herself out.

**M**YSIE, born Margory McDonald, was eight-years-old when she and her family entered the wilderness of New Brunswick in 1836. The *New Brunswick Courier* announced the arrival of the Scots on Saturday, October 22, 1836:

*The ship Royal Adelaide arrived on Friday last in Saint John after 43 days from*

*Greenock... They embarked on the steamer Novelly and arrived in Fredericton on Monday morning. We understand that they are principally from the Isle of Skye (Scotland) and are as valuable a description of settlers as have ever immigrated to this country. (p. 2, col. 2)*

The settlers then travelled north by

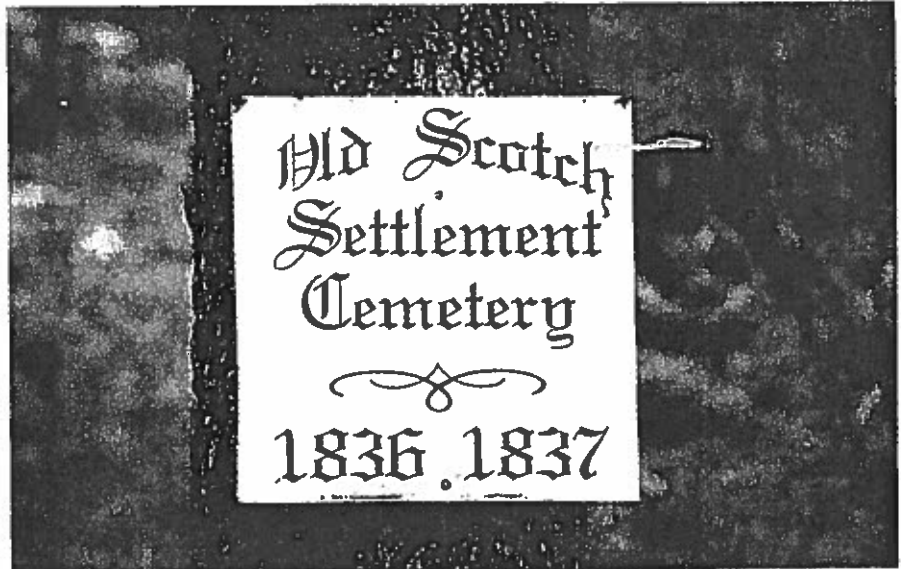
horse teams through dense forests to reach Scotch Settlement. In all 42 Scottish families, mostly from the Isle of Skye, came to the Stanley area that year. Another 15 families from England also settled nearby in the area now known as English Settlement.

Many of the Scottish immigrants were fishermen who had no skills as farmers and woodsmen. Later, with hindsight, the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company officials judged them ill prepared to establish a community. Like many, the McDonald family was attracted to Canada by Land Company advertisements posted in various areas of the British Isles. Company shareholders in London, who stood to gain profits from land sales, were so anxious to establish new communities that they advertised land and other services at unbelievable prices. Norman Nicholson, an agent for the company, offered free passage to Canada for families. However, once the ship was 40 miles out to sea, he forced the settlers to sign documents that would see them reimburse him for

their passage in two to three years. After reviewing a Petition (#77, registered Jan. 10, 1838 in the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Canada) and seeing their X's and few of their own signatures, many of these people may not have understood the papers that they had agreed to sign. This petition seeking compensation for their living conditions was not given immediate consideration. By the time it was filed, many of those requesting action had given up and moved elsewhere.

Nicholson promised 100-acre plots of land with five acres cleared and crops ready for harvest upon their arrival along with comfortable cabins to live in. Those given land were to farm or harvest lumber in order to reimburse for their land within a specified time period or given an option to lease for 50 years at a rate of one shilling per acre. Medical attention was to be available during the voyage as well as in the community once settled in Canada.

These promises led the Scottish immigrants to believe that their transition to the new country would be easy. However, when they arrived in November, their log cabins were without windows, doors, floors, or moss chinking in the walls. These people were not accustomed to the extreme cold and snow of the New Brunswick winters. The settlers complained until they received 2,500 board feet of lumber in order to finish their drafty cabins. No crops had been planted. The axes given to the settlers



Marking the site of the Old Scotch Settlement. Photo by Sharon Bird Anderson

had no eyes for handles; therefore they would have gathered dead tree branches from beneath the snow for firewood. During the first Canadian winter, 48 out of 121 men, women and children in Scotch Settlement starved or froze to death. The dead included Mysie's father. Those who were ill received no medical attention. The first doctor arrived in the fall of 1837, stayed only a short time and it was June of 1841 before a replacement doctor appeared in the area. In the spring, many of the Scottish families gave up and moved into Stanley or to other locations in the Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward where supplies were more accessible. A few remained in Scotch Settlement but only for a short time.

The 1861 York County census shows that Mysie still lived with her family. The census lists Mysie; her mother, widow; her brothers James, farmer; Donald, trapper; and Charles, general labourer. Mysie would be 33 years old.

There seems to be little story regarding Mysie until her family members died and she was left alone. Whether rumour or fact, a legend surrounds this incredible woman. It is clear she was determined to remain in the settlement. In an era when people weren't always aware of how easily disease could spread, Mysie was smart enough, when eating at a neighbour's, to bring her own cup and

spoon carved from some sort of stone.

Winslow Jones, who grew up in the area and is now in his eighties, recalls the small cabin Mysie constructed near Tay Falls, which remained there after her death. She lived there while working on local farms pulling weeds, thinning turnips, hoeing, or cutting logs. She fixed pieces of birch bark around the building much like shingles to act as protection against the wind and rain.

All of those interviewed confirmed that this eccentric lady never begged for anything but always worked for her handouts, often taking home in her knapsack food or provisions. On one occasion after a day of hard work, she carried home a pig's head that she would use to make headcheese. Through generations, Jean Spillman's family related the story of Mysie working in a field turning up soil. As two men approached Mysie, shouting obscenities at her, she stood holding her curved knife for them to see. They gave up their prank quickly.

While Mysie may have been dependent on the nearest communities of Woodlands and Tay Falls for some provisions, she was mostly self-sufficient. Locals had a hard time beating her to the nearby fishing hole first thing in the morning. Pulling her graylings (trout) carefully from among the entangled logs at the river's bottom, she proudly took her catch home. The deep hole in the bend of

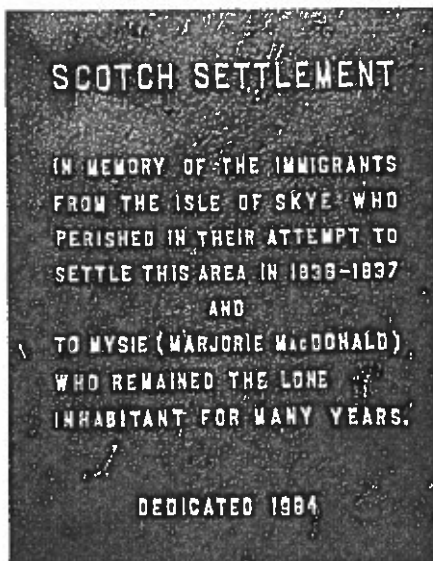


Photo by Sharon Bird Anderson

the Tin Kettle Stream is still nicknamed Mysie's Fishing Hole.

Mysie not only cut her own firewood and logs as needed, but also made brooms. Using lengths cut from small trees, she whittled thin strands on one end. Near the top of the strands, she wrapped snare wire to keep them from breaking. After peeling the bark from the remainder of the wood, she cut the entire piece an appropriate length, which included a smooth handle. Always barefoot in the summer, she walked from the Nashwaak River to the Miramichi River and the port of Chatham where she may have sold many brooms at once as ships of the time used wooden brooms to sweep their decks. Mysie bartered and sold her brooms in exchange for goods that she needed. Mr. Jones remembers Mysie's stiff wooden broom used in his grandfather's barn.

The hour-long walk that she made to Woodlands during the summer months, she also traveled by hand-made snowshoes in winter. Trapping for food and furs, she exchanged these for supplies. Steve Davidson's family describes Mysie wrapped in furs and sleeping in a pork barrel to keep warm while waiting to begin her journey back to Scotch Settlement one winter. People did not encourage her into their homes for more than an occasional meal and certainly not for a night's sleep.

While some grew accustomed to her presence, others felt she brought evil. On more than one occasion, people accused her of witchcraft. Her knack for accurate

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**"With all the conveniences of today, one could not possibly imagine the helplessness Mysie and her people must have felt those first winters."**

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fortune-telling caused some to become suspicious. They reasoned that she couldn't know what would happen unless she had cast a spell on them. Two men did not heed Mysie's advice and refused to turn

back in the direction they had come. Part of their wagon fell apart as they started down the steep Stanley Hill. The wagon flipped and killed one of the two men. Jean Spillman, who lives in Nashwaak Village, recalled her grandfather's fear of Mysie. Sitting in his grandmother's kitchen, Mysie had come to visit and he remembered her unkempt hair and long fingernails which, because she had no scissors, were never trimmed.

The positive medicinal effects of Mysie's Labrador Tea, made from the native plant, caused people to condemn her for suspected potions even though they were beneficial. In reality, many people used native grown plants for salves and other home made cures.

Mysie gathered berries or hazel and beech nuts in the wilderness to eat and often sold some at nearby stores. When she ventured onto private property, she wasn't always welcomed. It is rumoured that she barely escaped with her life for trespassing on one farm as the owner took shots at her.

The woman of Old Scotch Settlement was the last to remain there. One hundred and sixty nine years after the McDonalds and other Scottish settlers arrived in the New Brunswick wilderness, little remains of their community. Guided there by Sarah and Vernon Wilkins, I saw the hollowed ground cellars built across from each other on the Old Stanley Road. They were almost unrecognizable. According to a book written by Frances Beaven *The Backwoods of New Brunswick* these cabins would have been approximately 14 x 14 foot square, by today's standards the equivalent of a bedroom that accommodates one individual. Mounds of collapsed rocks that once stood in their dwellings as fireplaces lay covered with many years' growth of moss.

A short distance away, in an area only inhabited by wildlife, is the small cemetery where a river stone monument stands as tribute to those who endured hardship and sorrow. Dead leaves, grass and rotting tree stumps cover the piles of grey stone that hide bodies and their story.

Attached to a tall maple tree behind the monument is a framed list of the 42



## **Mysie's tea\***

Labrador Tea Plant (*Iedum groenlandicum*) is found in spruce forests and is more common in wet sites such as bogs or along brooks. It prefers acidic soil.

The strong aromatic leaves can be made into tea.

The plant has a high Vitamin C content and as a tea is good for flu, cold or other ailments. It can also be used externally to stimulate nerves and stomach, to cure coughs and hoarseness.

The plant is also an ingredient used by Native Canadians for medicinal purposes.

### **Preparation for one cup of tea:**

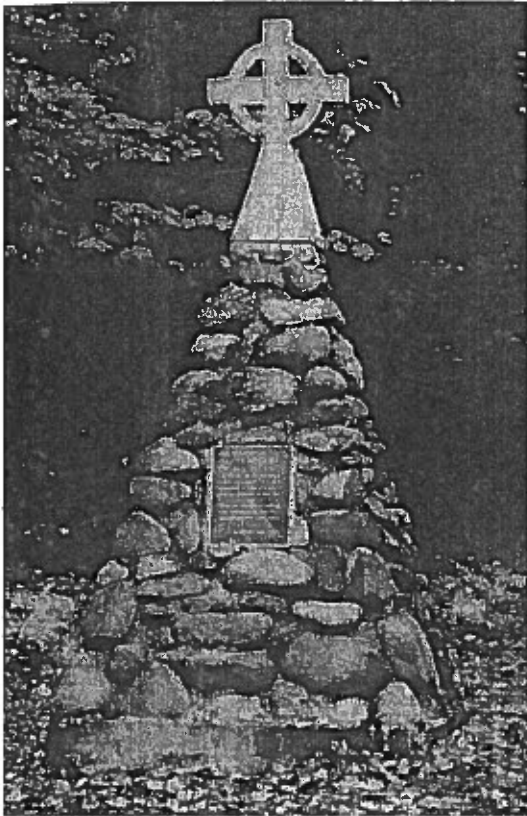
Use one to two teaspoons of crushed Labrador Tea Leaves brewed with hot water for five to six minutes. Do not boil. May sweeten with honey.

*\*The author does not recommend the consumption of wild plants without the advice of an expert in this field.*

men who brought their families to the area in 1836. Many of the family names are still common in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. The area remains wilderness and is only accessible by all terrain or four wheel drive vehicle.

Nearly 100 years after Mysie's death in 1906, the Old Scotch Settlement community may be gone, but Mysie's legend lives on through people in awe of her unbelievable strength. In fact the local historical village, King's Landing, just north of Fredericton, NB has incorporated Scotch Settlement's tragic history which is portrayed through a real life character named Mysie McDonald.





Celtic cross tops a cairn dedicated to Old Scotch Settlement

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Citizens restored Old Scotch Settlement Cemetery in 1984. In 1984, as part of a Bicentennial project, a group of local citizens took it upon themselves to restore the Old Scotch Settlement Cemetery. Countless hours were spent clearing mature trees that grew up through shallow graves. People used metal bars and prodded the ground in order to determine where the graves were among the huge, granite rock formations. Valley Forest Products (a local Forest Management Company) donated 10 acres surrounding the cemetery site that would not be harvested. Many volunteers donated time and materials to construct a monument from river stone complete with Celtic cross. Valley Forest Products donated a plaque for the monument honouring the Scottish settlers and Mysie McDonald. Children from the Stanley school made and painted 48 white crosses and donated them to the cemetery. A dedication ceremony included dignitaries from local communities and Fredericton, church representatives and citizens who paid special tribute to the almost forgotten settlers. To add a flavour of old Scotland, a father and daughter duo played Scottish tunes on bagpipes for those in attendance. Volunteers continue to maintain the "cairn" (burial ground) on a regular basis in order to preserve a piece of area history. ❧

*Sharon Bird Anderson would like to write a book on Old Scotch Settlement. If any readers have information relevant to the Isle of Skye in the mid 1830s or to the Scotch Settlements in Prince Edward Island or Nova Scotia you can contact her at [apaws@nbnet.nb.ca](mailto:apaws@nbnet.nb.ca)*

### Framed Names of Those Settlers Who Brought Their Families to Old Scotch Settlement in the Prospect of Seeking a Better Life:

John McLennan	John McDonald
Mat McInnes	Ronald McDonald
Martin McKinnon	Alex McCrea
Alex Urquhart	Donald McDugald
Don McMillan	F. McLellan
Rory McCuaig	Rory Matheson
William Campbell	Kenneth McKenzie
Hugh McDonald	Angus McDugald
John Ferguson	Austin McDonald
Donald McRae	Ronald Smith
Donald McGillivray Jr.	J. Stewart
Alex McLeod	Roderick McDonald
Murdock MacPherson	John McInnes
Charles McGillivray	Duncan McDugald
Donald Hossack	Donald McDonald Jr.
Angus McPhee	Allan McDonald
Angus Gillis	James McKinnon
John Gillis	C. McDugald
Angus McDonald	Donald McDonald Sr.
Donald McGillivray Sr.	James McLennan
Name Unknown	Name Unknown
Neil MacPherson – since added to list	

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- ❧ New Brunswick Provincial Archives
- ❧ Historical and Genealogy Lectures
- ❧ Family Walking Parade
- ❧ Irish Dance Workshop
- ❧ Daytime entertainment
- ❧ Miramichi Irish Rose Pageant
- ❧ Evening Pubs
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