In 1975, Paul MacKinnon, known since his childhood in the nickname-heavy context of industrial Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, as “Moose,” was inspired to adapt the comic book stories he had been writing for and about his friends into something that could be published and sold to a wider audience. This was to become Old Trout Funnies, a comic that lasted only three issues but spawned a quarter century of additional comic work and inspired an entire comedic motif on the Island. What proved so successful—in legacy if not in the establishment of a career—was how he tapped into resonant themes shared by many in the baby boom generation experiencing post-industrialism, particularly the tensions between how Cape Bretoners perceived themselves versus how they were perceived—or thought they were perceived—by others.

Old Trout Funnies is an alternative comic in the literal sense of being self-published and distributed far outside the mainstreams of comic publishing, and in the stylistic sense of being heavily inspired and influenced by the “comix” that had managed to make their way into MacKinnon’s collection (Sanders). However, alterity imbues the Cape Breton character, and the ethnographic presentation of Cape Breton in both MacKinnon’s histories and counter-histories shed light on that sense of being Othered by dominant forces.

Cape Breton Island as Other

Cape Breton is an island comprising about one-fifth of the area and one-sixth the population of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. In 1784, just after the American Revolution, when eastern Canada became flooded with displaced Loyalists and the British government reconsidered its role in the colonies, the then-British colony of Nova Scotia cleaved off two territories along natural boundaries: New Brunswick at the isthmus of Chignecto, and Cape Breton Island across the mile-wide Strait of Canso. These added to the separate British colonies of St. John’s Island (soon renamed Prince Edward Island) across the Northumberland Strait, and Newfoundland across the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In 1820, the Crown reverted Cape Breton back to Nova Scotia and its provincial capital, Halifax, in large part because it had failed to create any sort of house of assembly. That loss of self-determination is still the bane of nationalists and conspiracy theorists alike, especially as Cape Breton County (the easternmost of the island’s four counties) emerged soon thereafter as one of the top coal- and steel-producing centers of Canada. The erstwhile capital, Sydney,
became home to the steel mill, and coal mines gave rise to smaller towns along the northeast Atlantic coast from Sydney Mines to Donkin.

This sense of being removed from the corridors of power was furthered through a number of historical developments. The building of a fixed link across the Strait of Canso had been a long-standing campaign promise, and its delay until the fifties was pointed to as ongoing proof of Cape Breton’s lesser status: Since the Victorian days when the giant MacAskill trudged out of Cape Breton lifting record-shattering weights, each campaign had been marked by new promises of a bridge or tunnel linking the Island with the mainland. After each election, the politicians returned to the mainland (by ferry) and continued on to Ottawa—where the causeway, bridge or tunnel was somehow forgotten. (Peleine 30)

Almost immediately upon its completion, however, it became a symbol of Cape Breton out-migration: as the final lyrics to “Causeway Crossing,” a song written a quarter century later by Albert MacDonald and John Gillis, suggest, “It was built for going away.”

The descendants of the Gaelic-speaking Scots who immigrated to the western side of the Island—and who to this day comprise the majority of Cape Bretoners—keep as part of their self-understanding the stories of systematic repression of their language and their cultural traditions:

The attitude of educators towards Gaelic was a faithful copy of the policies in effect in the British Isles. The main rule was that Gaelic was not allowed in the schoolhouse, though everyone present, including the teacher, often as not had a far deeper knowledge of Gaelic than could be equaled by the rudimentary school English of those times. The policy was pursued to the point where people living today remember being physically punished at school for using Gaelic. (Shaw 74)

A legend dating from the late nineteenth century, concerning a priest who burned all the fiddles in the town of Mabou, is still in active circulation; embedded in that story is the ironic postscript that not only were some fiddles hidden by wily players but that the tradition more than survived, with Mabou being one of the centers for the internationally acclaimed Cape Breton fiddling styles (McDavid). The theme of triumphalism despite the wishes of outsiders imbues local history: Robert J. Morgan, one of the island’s most visible and popular historians, titled his 2004 history of the University College of Cape Breton Perseverance (after the university’s Gaelic motto “Theid Dichioll Air Thoiseach,” or “Perseverance Will Triumph”), and
his 2009 two-volume history of the island—Rise Again!—after the anthemic song of the same name by Leon Dubinsky.

If being an inherent counterhegemon is part of the Island’s collective sense of self, its projection as alternative also stems from outsiders. The first threats to industrialization during the global economic depression of the thirties in both Cape Breton specifically and Nova Scotia in general spurred the provincial government towards framing the province as a tourist destination for central Canadians and northeastern Americans: the Scottishness of Nova Scotia—from its name as “New Scotland” to the significant population claiming Scots ancestry to the (subjective) similarities in landscape between Scotland and Cape Breton—was the hook. This process of “Tartanization” as a presentation of an antimodernist site for the benefit of the tourist gaze (MacKay; MacKay and Bates) has, in some respects, more deeply ingrained the assumption that Cape Breton is ill-equipped to participate properly in contemporary affairs, in a sort of Canadian orientalism (cf. Said). Such criticisms arise as much from Cape Bretoners themselves; when the local results in provincial or federal elections are for opposition parties, or when infrastructural projects are challenged, letters to the editor and Internet commentary inevitably refer to an innate inability of Cape Bretoners to think strategically or clearly.

Most of the time, however, the self-perception of the Cape Bretoner as simple, carefree, guileless, and uninterested in the outside world lives firmly in the ludic life of the island. Robert Klymasz, in his formative work on the ethnic joke in Canada, notes how ethnic humor is as operative within the group as it is from without:

\[\text{[T]he ethnic joke and its participants serve to transform the ethnically invisible workaday world into a kind of instant mini-dream world featuring a fantastic menagerie of somewhat amorphous, comical figures whose supposed idiosyncrasies ostensibly surround us but which are in actual fact seldom, if ever, in sight. [\ldots] In the course of this sudden transformation, the banalities of mainstream conformity and homogeneity recede into the background and give way to rich, albeit imagined, diversity in place or the real, dull conformity. But besides all this, the ethnic joke plays still another role: for while it serves to provide a handy antidote to pressures of conformity, it simultaneously perpetuates the desire and the urge for identity, individuality, and separateness in terms of ethnicity. (324-25)](ext)\]

To put it another way, groups that are (or are perceived as being) outside of a mainstream often need to display cultural fluency with the mainstream in order to participate in it
successfully, obviating and obscuring cultural differences or the perception thereof as best they can. This imperative comes as much from within the group as a strategy for integration as it does from the mainstream as a condition of entry. This understanding of the self—and an understanding of how the other perceives the self-turns the esoteric-exoteric tension into a subject of contemplation. A long-standing tradition in Cape Breton humor and the humor of Atlantic Canada generally, both as performed on stage and in interpersonal speech play, is of the unsophisticated happy-go-lucky naïf in conflict with the authoritarian “come from away,” with the latter ultimately bested by the former’s common sense. Dishpan Parade, a radio program that ran from 1948 to 1952 on Sydney’s CJCB, was hosted by two island characters attempting sophistication and featured listener-penned, Cape Breton-themed parodies of the songs of the day (Bergfeldt-Munro 39). Inspired by that program was the comedy duo of Hughie and Allan, depicted as two rural Cape Bretoners “dressing up”—adding ties to their plaid shirts and overalls—to come into town, where, with their thick accents and simple outlooks, they struggle to negotiate with the modern (MacDougall).

The Emergence of a Cape Breton Counterculture

Emerging within that humor tradition was comics artist Paul MacKinnon. While in person a very quiet and shy man, he had since adolescence been a writer and illustrator. At his high school, he was the go-to person for yearbook illustrations, posters for school dances and band gigs, and for penning short comic pieces. He was the one approached to write the “Class Prophecy” essay for his graduating year, imagining what the future twenty years hence would hold for each student, which balanced out the more informational and sincere “Where are They Now?” essay given to a more responsible graduate. After high school, he went to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, but left once the student loan permitted him to travel.

After a few years back and forth between the steel plant in Sydney and the nickel mines of Ontario, Paul found himself again in Cape Breton, hanging out with an interesting crowd, trying to make a go of it in the dwindling economy. Many of his friends had first met in high school through Young Christian Students, a service organization based on cooperative and Catholic social justice models; the students involved also organized frequent social activities that brought together teenagers from across industrial Cape Breton, which is how MacKinnon, from the northernmost town of Sydney Mines, knew Peyton Chisholm from Sydney’s North End and Glace Bay’s Karl Nightingale, among many others.
This group was of the first generation raised with the expectation of working somewhere other than the steel plant or the coal mines, reaching their early twenties just as the local economy was in the initial throes of post-industrial decline. They made the effort to stay in Cape Breton and were finding work mostly through granting agencies such as the federal government’s Local Initiatives Program, which had the twofold objective of job creation and “to invoke the participation and involvement of community groups and the unemployed to provide services that would benefit the whole community” (Roy and Wong 160).

The community-oriented work meshed well with both the social-justice influences of cooperativism and the left-leaning tendencies of the American counterculture (with which the group closely identified). Psychedelia, the blues revival, and underground comics held their attention. Local blues-rock player Roy Batherson was rechristened Matt Minglewood after the Grateful Dead’s “The New New Minglewood Blues,” and that style was the dominant musical force on the Island for most of the decade (Narváez). MacKinnon’s was not the only comic book collection but perhaps the most enviable, including such hard-to-find items as issue one of Robert Armstrong’s Mickey Rat and several of Gilbert Shelton’s Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers stories. The arrival of “Back-to-the-landers” even brought real American hippies to the island and subsequently into their circle (Weaver).

MacKinnon’s contemporary and close friend Peyton Chisholm recalls,

<ext>It was a time of lots of different projects that people were involved in, maybe part-time grants and things like that. [...] Community projects or [...] whatever. Maybe social development projects or even technology or art projects. [...] And the Follies was going on. So there was all that different energy around of people doing things. And people were coming and going all the time too, back and forth to Toronto or wherever, and starting to go out West. (Personal interview)</ext>

The “Follies” refers to the Rise and Follies of Cape Breton Island, a sketch and musical revue written and performed by a collective theatrical society billed as the Steel City Players. The show would go on through several iterations, developing its own brand of self-referentialism and satire, alongside sincere compositions such as the aforementioned “Causeway Crossing” and “Rise Again.” MacKinnon would eventually contribute poster art for this group as well.

Leisure time was spent in each other’s company, either in their homes or in the tavern culture that was springing up
following the relaxation of liquor licensing laws in the province. These taverns were the site of much of the creative energy in the city, especially the College Pub and Bookstore, serving what was then called Xavier College, the extension campus of St. Francis Xavier University that would become the independent Cape Breton University.

<MacKinnon’s First Comics>

All through this time, MacKinnon had continued to draw, bringing his sketchbook with him wherever he went. He captured this tavern culture and included his friends in the process. He developed a comic alter ego, Snoots, with hopes of creating a character similar to the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. And he wrote and illustrated two interconnected adventures featuring elements of both Robin Hood and Peter Pan, with all characters based on his friends.

The first, “Robin Twang and Timmy Easter Seal . . . ‘Storm the Castle!’” features the title characters, based on his friends Karl Nightingale and Jimmy Tompkins, respectively, who have been “raiding the King’s cannabis fields and encouraging the peasants to revolt or at least be naughty” (MacKinnon 41). A plan is hatched whereby the King (Peyton Chisholm) has a trap set for the more easily tricked Timmy: a bottle of Brights 74 Port Wine (an inexpensive local drink referred to as “Goof”) in a box-trap. Timmy is caught, and Robin, lounging by the pool at his summer home surrounded by topless women, is called with the news. He enters the King’s castle in the disguise of a football player, frees Timmy, sneaks into a party and spikes the punch with LSD. Leaving the attendees in a psychedelic haze, the two return through the forest, only for it to be revealed that Timmy had some of the spiked punch.

<FIGURE 4.1>

The second features Cap’n Glow—a Captain Hook-type figure who uses Chipman’s Golden Glow (a local cider and another popular, cheap drink) as mind-control—plotting to take over all of NeverAgain Land. He sends out three aides to subdue the population: an anthropomorphic happy face in a sailor’s cap to control “the mindless ones” (who have televisions for heads); Bad Onion (based on a friend of a friend with a prominent unibrow whose identity is now lost to MacKinnon) to attack the working-class trolls; and Smittee (Kevin Smith), who is responsible for the middle-class trolls. (All trolls are MacKinnon self-portraits.) Cap’n Glow, meanwhile, focuses on his rival, Peter Pond (John Aylward, who was raised on Pond Road in Sydney Mines), who “sits and drinks and swaps stories with two of his friends, Duck McD Drake [John Hugh Edwards, known as ‘Duck’] and Swooner Crooner [musician Ernie Laidlaw]” (MacKinnon, 117). The Glow works on everyone: mindless ones,
working-class and middle-class alike (Golden Glow was also called “Equalizer” as it made everyone equally stupid). In a surprise attack, Cap’n Glow pours Glow down Peter Pond’s throat and turns the elegant hero into Tony Galanto (the nickname of yet another friend of a friend whose identity is lost to memory). By story’s end, Cap’n Glow is in control of NeverAgain Land, and we are left wondering if it can be saved.

MacKinnon’s sketchbook almost parodies the classic definition of folklore—artistic communication in small groups (Ben-Amos 13)—by being so literal. It was circulated within a small group, transmitted—literally passed from hand to hand—among the members. It was esoteric and relevant, displaying a mastery of that group’s understanding of its constituent members. It is, in fact, profoundly esoteric: it is nigh on incomprehensible to anyone reading it who was not in that friendship circle.

*<a>The Cape Breton Liberation Army Rises</a>*

Like most friendship groups, MacKinnon’s circle was an idioculture, with jargon and nicknames and legendary episodes becoming part of a shared repertoire: fluency with it connotes membership. Meanwhile, beers would be consumed, and as the bottles emptied, Danny Madden, another friend, would call each “another dead soldier.” If the empties were the soldiers, then surely they were the generals. But the generals of what? Not just an army, but the Cape Breton Liberation Army.

Splinter cells and revolutionary guards were in the zeitgeist of the time. On the international scene, Patty Hearst’s abduction by the Symbionese Liberation Army and the United Nations’ recognition of the Palestine Liberation Army had both occurred in 1974, and the actions of the Front de Liberation de Québec during the October Crisis of 1970 were still fresh in the mind. Moreover, in late 1973, a resolution had been circulated by the chairman of the Cape Breton Metro Planning Commission for Cape Breton to become its own province, stirring up much debate in the sleepy news weeks prior to Christmas and prompting a response from Bob Chambers, the editorial cartoonist for Nova Scotia’s largest newspaper, Halifax’s *Chronicle-Herald*.

MacKinnon, who amidst his one-off design jobs for tour posters and certificate calligraphy had worked on a Local Initiatives Program-funded project teaching art to grade-school children, started the commercial design production course at Holland College in Prince Edward Island. The program’s final project required that he take an idea from inception through to all stages of completion, but his instructors, Henry Purdy and Russell Stewart, were open to the students’ suggestions of what
that project could be. Of course, MacKinnon decided to do a comic book.

If the comic book were to find an audience outside of his immediate circle of friends, MacKinnon would have to move beyond the esoterica of his friendship group and make something recognizable and appropriate to an indeterminate other. He could maintain his friends as characters—his practice at drawing them and his store of photos to use as reference would only help him as an illustrator—but he had to put aside stories based on their hallucinogenic and sexual predilections in order to access a wider worldview. Gone were the fantasy adventurers in a drug-enhanced landscape, and the Cape Breton Liberation Army (CBLA) had its introduction as comic characters in a recognizable Cape Breton.

In the first issue, two CBLA members—General Peyton (based on Chisholm) and Festus (based on friend Danny “Festus” MacIntyre)—are interrupted in their pool game by the Reserve Army, working on orders from the mainland chief (then Premier Gerald Regan). They manage to escape and, at a meeting at headquarters the following night, Peyton decides that they must hide out on Prince Edward Island until things cool down, pausing only to do one more hijacking. The next morning, they capture another beer truck, but it is filled with Halifax Hard Hats, mercenaries of the Premier. Another daring escape is achieved and they make their way to Prince Edward Island, only to receive new orders. The second story in the comic then has General Peyton trying to rescue Peter Pond from his Golden Glow haze, with the help of Robin Twang and Timmy Easter Seal. They do so with the help of Duck McDrake and Swooner Crooner, and all is well until a number of women complain that the author hasn’t included a single female character.

The first issue garnered enough interest to merit MacKinnon creating a second. It has one sustained story, which begins with the telling of the spruce budworm blight that had actually been affecting vast swathes of forest in northern Cape Breton. MacKinnon suggests that one of the moths responsible had flown through the pollution in the town of Port Hawkesbury, situated along the Canso Strait, which was the site of three recently constructed heavy industrial complexes: a heavy water plant, a pulp mill, and an oil-burning generating station. The pollution caused mutations in the moth, resulting in a half dozen giant spruce budworms terrorizing the construction site of a new hydroelectric dam. The Premier has no choice but to call in the greatest fighter on the Island, General Peyton, despite his CBLA affiliation; Peyton agrees, as the assignment will serve as time credited towards his unemployment insurance claim. He slays
several of the budworms single-handedly but eventually calls in reinforcements, a brother and sister team from Glace Bay named Ole and Nat Kingcoleman. Together, they defeat the worms and order is restored.

The third issue begins 100,000 years ago as a caveman participating in a giant snail hunt on the shores of Newfoundland falls in the ice and is frozen, only to be thawed out and awoken in contemporary Cape Breton, where he is given the name Lucifer Bludd and finds work as a roadie with East Coast bluesman Matt Minglewood. (He is based on George Henderson, MacKinnon’s friend and an actual roadie for Minglewood). His story is paused while we see the CBLA gather at headquarters for another meeting where, after revealing their new logo and currency, General Peyton announces that they will kidnap a visiting OPEC minister for ransom. Once again, it is a set-up by mainland forces, and the location of their headquarters is revealed. The Premier dispatches Earle Terrific, also known as Captain Sydney (based on then-Sydney mayor Earle Tubrett), and he arrives in his spaceship shaped exactly like the new Sydney City Hall, Tubrett’s main legacy. The CBLA escape as Nat Kingcoleman provides a distraction, diverting the soldiers down a secret passage that opens up into the basement of the tavern where Lucifer Bludd is setting up the band’s equipment, picking up his storyline where it was interrupted. Everyone in the tavern rises up and defeats the soldiers, and a celebration commences.

The CBLA Legacy

Despite contributing some Cape Breton Liberation Army strips to a local publication, and his efforts at penning a fourth issue, MacKinnon ultimately found the possibility of being a full-time graphic artist and living in Cape Breton impossible, so he returned to university for a nursing degree, which was to be his career until his recent retirement. However, starting in 1979 and continuing with only a few interruptions until 2000, he produced a series of wall calendars featuring the CBLA. They became something of a local tradition, a frequent present for those who had moved away, and a popular giveaway on local radio contests.

The calendars from 1979 to 1985 featured such motifs as the failing Glace Bay heavy water plant converted into a local brewery (1979), the Sydney Steel Plant converted into a training school for working in Alberta (1980), the destruction of a local architectural landmark, Moxham Castle, through its use as the site of a CBLA party (1983 for the night before, and 1984 for the morning after), and the beginnings of physical decline from ten years of service in the CBLA. During this time, he was occasionally involved in other mediations, including a short
film produced for local cable television showing the army’s training regimen (Campbell). His creation had started to eclipse his own field of control. Dave Harley was a friend from Sydney Mines, and had been working as a disc jockey in Port Hawkesbury at the same time MacKinnon was at Holland College. When hitchhiking back and forth from college to home, MacKinnon would stop at Harley’s place, and they talked about the CBLA. Soon thereafter, Harley developed the character of General John Cabot Trail of the CBLA, first as an on-air alter-ego, then as a local performer and emcee. He would eventually make appearances on national radio and television and release two albums, and in many ways become the name most closely associated with the CBLA.

MacKinnon took a break for a year, but 1987 kicked off an era in which the calendars became more topic-oriented, with the main themes being the passage of time and the ongoing second-class status of Cape Breton. The 1987 calendar depicts a number of his friends and local celebrities (including Harley) being expelled from Cape Breton like Adam and Eve from Eden, crossing the Canso Causeway and moving westward. The 1988 calendar celebrates twenty years of blues rock in Cape Breton—by parodying the “It was twenty years ago today” lyric from the title track of the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, which had just celebrated its own twentieth anniversary—with references to Sam Moon and Matt Minglewood’s early bands playing at the long-defunct Chesterton Abbey. The runoff from the coke ovens at the steel plant had created the Sydney Tar Ponds, Canada’s most toxic site, due in part to the concentration of polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCBs; for his 1990 calendar, MacKinnon equated PCBs with “Professional Cape Bretoners,” local entertainers who had built careers largely upon the depiction of particular stereotypes. 1992’s presentation of Cape Bretoners standing in an endless series of queues—for benefits, for applying for work, for trains out of town—was followed in 1993 by a memorial to recently deceased musicians (many of whom were personal acquaintances). MacKinnon also turned his attention to the ubiquity of video lottery terminals (1996), the demise of East Coast blues in favor of the emergent Celtic pop phenomenon (1998), and CBLA members’ new status as grandparents (2000).

<FIGURE 4.3>

MacKinnon stopped producing new material for the public with the 2000 calendar. In addition to Dave Harley’s ongoing performances, still others took up the Cape Breton Liberation Army name. A local hip-hop collective released an album and performed together under that name in 2006, while genuine secessionists, if not necessarily insurrectionists, have created websites using the name semi-seriously (cf. Cabot). CBLA T-
shirts are available throughout the island (though none using any of MacKinnon’s images).<a>Retrospect</a>

An annotated reprint of MacKinnon’s CBLA work was published in 2015 (Brodie and MacKinnon), and those who are seeing the complete material for the first time (either through the book or a coincident exhibition at the university art gallery) point out that, even when the specific topical references are outdated, the overall depiction of Cape Breton still resonates.

MacKinnon now makes the claim, as he has maintained since his earliest interviews (Power), that his aim was always to be funny, not to create political satire or social commentary. But it is clear that the comics were found funny because of the keen observation and presentation of fundamental attitudes present, if not always operative, in the Cape Breton mindset. The adventures of the CBLA touched on three interconnected themes of contemporary island culture, all playing on the sense of otherness as a primary motif discussed above.

First of all, the recognizable Cape Breton landscape was not the idyllic Celtic villages of tourist literature but modern, urban, and somewhat squalid. Most of the CBLA’s time was spent listening to East Coast blues music in taverns, mainly constructed from prefabricated aluminum: temporary structures that somehow became permanent features. Their headquarters was the abandoned and graffiti-covered Martello Tower at the Chapel Point Battery Site in Sydney Mines, and the final showdown of the first issue took place on the Seal Island Bridge, a colossal construction feat finished only a decade earlier that spanned the Bras D’Or Lakes and contributed to the completion of the Trans Canada Highway. Later issues depict the construction site of the Wreck Cove hydroelectric dam, the “industrial complexes of Port Hastings—Port Hawkesbury,” Cabot House, Cape Breton’s tallest building, and the newly completed Sydney City Hall.

All of these projects were the results of government intervention in the wake of the devastating economic news of the late sixties. Hawker Siddley, owner of the Sydney Steel Plant, had announced its imminent closure, coincident with a similarly grim outlook for the future of the coal mines, and the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO) was formed as a bulwark against economic collapse and an effort to transition Cape Breton from a resource-based industrial economy to something else. Whatever was around was contingent on government largesse, and thus a continued dependence on the goodwill of off-island political power.

The most self-evident theme running through the comics is a sense of Cape Breton nationalism, taken at times to the extreme measure of a desire for independence. When that idea of
province-hood was sincerely floated in 1973, a host of local and provincial politicians and opinion makers weighed in on both sides of the issue. As Jordan Bishop wrote at the time, “The suggestion [. . .] that Cape Breton become Canada’s eleventh province makes a nice question for discussion during long winter nights, when people of this island have nothing better to do” (4). A general consensus emerged that independence was an untenable and perhaps even absurd suggestion, but that it was borne out of a genuine and justifiable sense of frustration with how the island’s political and economic future had been managed by either Halifax or Ottawa.

The CBLA was in constant conflict with “the mainland.” Similar to its connotation in Newfoundland or Hawai’i, the use of the term “mainland” implies not only a sense of removal from the center of power but also of being thought of as lesser-than by those in power. And so in the opening frame of the first issue it is revealed that the army has of late been liberating mainland beer trucks and taverns (naming the only drinking establishments in both Wolfville and Antigonish, the two university towns of mainland Nova Scotia), and are pursued by the reserve army and various mainland groups. The mainland chief is livid at their continued evasion. The Halifax Hard Hats, it is revealed, and not the locals, built the Seal Island Bridge. Throughout, the mainlanders are depicted as clean cut and square, while the CBLA are long-haired, hippie weirdos.

This segues into the third theme of the comics: the Cape Bretoner as affable skiver. Despite the long history of labor activism in the region, with the advent of the economic downturn and the reliance on government intervention in the form of make work projects, people in Cape Breton adopted what Jenny Cockburn calls a strategy for surviving deindustrialization: working from contingent contract to contingent contract to earn one’s “weeks,” i.e., enough paid work to be eligible for unemployment insurance (6). The strategy also involves Cape Bretoners typically not defining themselves so much by their employment as by the life they lead outside of work, their unpaid labor in the form of creative or community-oriented activities. The same period of time that occasioned the Old Trout Funnies also saw the birth of the Cape Breton Chorale, the Cape Breton Chordsmen barbershop chorus, multiple theatre troupes, and the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association, among others. Unemployment, underemployment, and service work do not have the same stigma they might have elsewhere. Simultaneously, islanders are aware of the perception that a life of contingent labor has in the eyes of the mainland (and, to a certain extent, in the eyes of the generation that went before them working in the mines and the plant). That perception becomes the basis of the affable
skiver as comic dramatis persona, so General Peyton takes his “pogey” into consideration when deciding whether to fight against the giant spruce budworms.

Using his friends as the characters fulfilling these personae (and allowing certain private jokes to get through), MacKinnon created a text that resonated with a larger, local audience. The CBLA, motivated by righteous indignation against the mainland, moved through a bleak landscape of prefabricated temporary buildings interrupted by make-work projects, in pursuit of little more than the right to spend as much time as possible in taverns and blues clubs. Such a presentation does not need a balance because comedy is not meant to be a sustained argument; it is positional, and contributes to one side of the dialectic.

<a>The Comics Ethnographer</a>

MacKinnon’s comics worked in part because they approached an ethnographic portrait of Cape Breton. Even within the counterfactual world he created, the landscape, the sensitivity to dialectic and speech play, the presentation of people and character, and the worldview in which they operate were all found to be an honest representation of place. There was a verisimilitude to the work, irrespective of it being fiction. Such vernacular ethnography (Brodie 143) is perhaps tacit and evocative more than descriptive, in part because, unlike the ethnographer who tries to communicate a time and place to a third party, MacKinnon’s audience was ultimately Cape Breton-centric. Conversely, because it was so local, it needed to resonate as being of that time and place with people equally fluent in that time and place.

The cumulative experience of the work provided a recognizable Cape Breton to the reader of the time and thus constituted a text to be parsed for such details, as others have said of similar cultural productions (Cowley; Lovelace). As a locally created text, it is an important read, in part because it is so one-sided, and becomes something of the antithesis and counterbalance to the sincere and solemn, romantic nationalist popular history that tends to dominate locally. In order to prepare the annotations for the reprint, I had to interview not only MacKinnon but anyone I could from that generation to track down each arcane reference, like the local cider, or the downtown coffee house that introduced psychedelia to the island, or a local politician’s particular foibles. The Cape Breton reader of today might need help with the time-specific details, but it still reads as true.

In an effort to become a professional comic book writer and artist, Paul MacKinnon looked to his contemporary Cape Breton as inspiration for a humorous story that would amuse not simply his
circle of friends but a larger audience. He did so by taking stock of the local attitudes shared by, but not exclusive to, his peers and the sights and sounds of his home community, committing them to paper for what could have been an ephemeral production. His emphasis on Cape Bretoners’ own sense of what made them distinct and different from the mainland, filtered through the fantasy of secession, proved prescient. Forty years later, they provide an insight into a time and a place poorly understood in part because of a sense of embarrassment many have for the seventies, which is unfortunate given how those trying circumstances gave rise to the island’s most exciting era of artistic and social creativity, and the creation of the Cape Breton alternative.

<notes>Notes</notes>
1. “In this [Scottish] identity, the physical landscape of Cape Breton was of crucial concern. The allegedly ‘Scottish’ landscape around Iona figured in promotions. The landscape of Cape Breton Island was central in this imagination of ethnicity and community” (Gordon 2010, 123).
2. In an abandoned story dating from about 1990, Harley appears on a television screen that is subsequently shot out by a figure in silhouette looking suspiciously like MacKinnon, who then summons the CBLA out of retirement through a Bat-signal-type device (Brodie and MacKinnon 2015, 108). Harley died in 2012.

<cited>Works Cited</cited>
Cape Breton Liberation Army. Cape Breton Liberation Army. Misfit Records, 2006. CD.


