

Ronald Caplan's Talk

Katharine McLennan Award

September 10, 2015

**I want to thank you all for coming today. I want to thank especially the staff of the McConnell Library, the staff of the Beaton Institute, and the Fortress of Louisbourg Association Volunteers and staff of Fortress of Louisbourg. I know Catherine Arseneau and Jane Arnold and Faye MacDougall have worked hard to bring this day together, and I appreciate hearing from David Stephens and Mike Hunter. As you now know Bonnie Thompson has been my work partner for about forty years, and I am sure you also know that I am nothing without her. From proofreader to a tough and tolerant good friend whatever the**

**weather, she is the primary debt I owe in the life of Cape Breton's Magazine. And I want to thank my own good wife, the remarkable Sharon Hope Irwin, who has recently been honoured with the Order of Nova Scotia and who remains the most solid and decent supporter and challenger I could hope for.**

**I owe so many debts I will not try to name them all, so many people whose generosity has made my work possible. You cannot imagine what it has meant to have the neighbours I have been blessed with, starting from where I first landed on the North Shore, to the furthest edges of this island and on to people living away, from postal workers to shopkeepers to**

**storytellers and local historians—  
countless people whose lives made our  
work possible. I am grateful to have Cape  
Breton's Magazine and the Breton Books  
to stand as a kind of tribute to and thanks  
for all those conversations, meals,  
understanding and guidance, a roof in the  
storm and teas, teas, teas.**

**Online you will find a website with a Guide  
to every speaker that appeared in the  
magazine and that is only a list of the ones  
who were actually in print not, for example,  
the man who ran out in a raging storm as  
night was falling in Inverness County to  
check on me, a stranger parked across the  
road while I was preparing to sleep in my  
VW van—just to be sure I was all right and**

**did I need to come inside.**

**In a nutshell, that is the kind of consideration that made Cape Breton's Magazine possible in a not-so-easy workplace.**

**There are tiny stories that illuminate those years of making the magazine. The time I asked a fellow who sold businesses what he thought my business might be worth and he told me, "Oh, you don't have a business. You have a lifestyle." So much for my career.**

**When I started the magazine, I went to Bert MacLeod at MacLeod's bookstore. I knew that if I did not convince Bert MacLeod to**

**be an advertiser I'd have little hope of success. So I went in and told him my story: "Cape Breton's Magazine would be the biggest thing on the newsstand. It would be a collection of folklore and the old ways, how we lived, and natural history of Cape Breton and tools of the pioneers and stories in Gaelic and French, lots of photographs, all on newsprint but with a heavy protective cover," and on and on. Bert heard me out and then he said: "I think you're crazy—and I'll take a full page ad."**

**One more little story about the making of Cape Breton's Magazine. I went to a car dealer and asked him to buy an ad. He said no. He did not think it would be of any**

value, but then he said that he had a friend who reads everything—everything—and if he reads Cape Breton’s Magazine then, yes, this car dealer would buy an ad in the next issue. So he makes a phone call and it goes like this: “I’ve got this fellow here from Cape Breton’s Magazine. Oh, you know the magazine. You never miss an issue.” And on and on. Okay.

He hung up and said, “Sure, I’ll take an ad.”

But me, I couldn’t let it go. I asked, “Where does he buy the magazine?”

“Oh,” he said, “he doesn’t buy it. He reads each issue standing up in Sobey’s.”

And on that I lifestyle I survived—a lifestyle and its products that you have seen fit,

**today, to honour with the Katharine McLennan Award.**

**Katharine McLennan was a brave and singular woman. She fought her family for her right to serve in the First World War and she put her life on the line over there—a genuine nurse/soldier who came home and turned a position of privilege into a life of serving her community. One of her achievements was work with her father and then on her own, preserving the history of early Louisbourg. Katharine recognized that it wasn't enough to collect information about the Fortress of Louisbourg. She worked to keep that story alive until the world caught up with her, and re-built the Fortress that we have**

today.

This room, her museum at Louisbourg, the model fortress she built and her work as a volunteer curator are all evidence that she certainly did not think it was enough to simply gather the story. The story of Louisbourg was to be shared if it was to be kept alive. And that is the challenge Katharine McLennan has put before me—the challenge to keep what has been collected as Cape Breton's Magazine, alive.

There are 5000 pages of Cape Breton's Magazine, about 125 Breton Books. The books are available in libraries and stores, and Cape Breton's Magazine—all 74 issues

**exactly as they first appeared—are available free to the world on a website. But being available online and through libraries is really not enough to keep those Cape Breton stories alive. They need to be read, they need to be told again, they need to be discussed.**

**I meet young people who know nothing of the stories Cape Breton's Magazine contains. At best they might remember flipping through a pile of oversized black-and-white magazines in their grandparents' cottage.**

**I often think that I came along, fairly desperate, a lover of poetry and local history, and I found my spot by kind of**

replacing a generation of people who traditionally would have been sitting there listening to the older generation tell their stories—but because of opportunity or lack of opportunity the younger generation had either stopped listening or had gone away in search of work or adventure. So that left me in the 1970s and '80s and '90s, a fellow trying to find a way to stay in Cape Breton, delighted to hear what those older people might have been telling the generation that had gone away. I listened and, as Katie Margaret Gillis once said of stories told in her childhood, “That was beautiful listening.” Add a camera and a tape recorder and you pretty much have the foundation of Cape Breton’s Magazine.

**I think the debt I owe to the hundreds of people who shared their stories carries with it the responsibility to keep those stories alive. Not just in print. That debt will shape my work going forward. One goal, for example, is to get our schools to more vigorously weave those stories and folktales and life histories into the regular classroom curriculum. To use the online website of Cape Breton's Magazine. It is all searchable and copiable—and it is free for the taking. Because I believe those Cape Breton chapters belong to our young people and can be effective teaching tools. Those stories are their roots that can serve them no matter what work they do or wherever on this lovely imperiled earth they manage to find that work. And**

**without these stories and some awareness of the people who told them, they, and we, are greatly diminished.**

**Katharine McLennan's example has taught us that it is up to us find ways of keeping our stories alive, whether as a book or a museum or the family history we tell across the dinner table.**

**Her work reminds us that it is all so fragile and that it all depends on each of us to protect what we think should not be lost.**

**It is an honour to have my name linked with Katharine McLennan, and I deeply appreciate that my work has been recognized with this award. For the honour**

**and for the continued challenge of the  
Katharine McLennan Award—I thank you  
with all my heart.**