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**"To Live Somewhere Else":  
Migration and Cultural Identity in Alistair MacLeod's Fiction**

**Mary Frances Finnigan**

**May 1996**

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## **Abstract**

As an interdisciplinary effort, this thesis will supplement its primary commitment to literary analysis with discussion of Alistair MacLeod's interpretation of the occupational culture of Western Cape Breton Island, including twentieth century fluctuations in the strength of the Scots-Gaelic community there. MacLeod is committed to an honest presentation of the occupational past and present, but moreover, he is an interpreter of the Scots-Gaelic identity, its persistence, and the subtle adaptations to change that create simultaneously a link to the past and a crisis in continuity. A discussion of his body of work as a whole provides the opportunity to examine his efforts at the development of a sustained ethnic character or range of characteristics that surface and resurface within individual stories. The consistencies that occur among a range of his characters contribute to a profound cultural identity whose roots lie in the Highland Scots past and emigrations to North America, and whose twentieth century struggles are subject to the waning population of its isolated communities. MacLeod not only records individual experience but traces collective cultural consciousness and identity through character. MacLeod seems to pursue the essence of this culture. The manner in which it is manifested within individual identity is the central element of this discussion.

## Introduction

The subject of this Atlantic Canada Studies thesis is the short fiction of Alistair MacLeod, contained in the collections The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,<sup>1</sup> As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,<sup>2</sup> and The Lost Salt Gift of Blood: New and Selected Stories.<sup>3</sup>

As an interdisciplinary effort, this thesis will supplement its primary commitment to literary analysis with discussion of MacLeod's interpretation of the occupational culture of Western Cape Breton Island, including twentieth century fluctuations in the strength of the Scots-Gaelic community there. The fictional world created by Alistair MacLeod is both a work of literary art and a unique cultural document. I have undertaken a loose chronological examination of MacLeod's stories in an effort to focus on the evolutionary theme of cultural identity that emerges throughout the opus of his work. MacLeod seems to pursue the essence of his culture, and the manner in which it is manifested within individual identity is the central element of this discussion.

MacLeod's use of memory and remembered time frames are key elements in his narratives. Many early stories tend to communicate a naturalism where the physical world seems to predominate over human existence. Structurally, these stories take the form of remembered first person narratives.

The rendering of some immediate Cape Breton settings is arguably

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<sup>1</sup> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976. Subsequent page references from this collection are to this edition. LSGB will also be used as an abbreviated reference.

<sup>2</sup> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986. Subsequent page references from this collection are to this edition. As Birds will be used as an abbreviated reference.

<sup>3</sup> Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1988. Subsequent page references from this collection are to this edition. New and Selected will be used as an abbreviated reference.

naturalistic in its examination of a treacherous landscape, severe hardships of labour, and isolation. MacLeod's depiction of characters' external struggle with the environment as revealed through livelihoods in fishing, coal mining, and forestry, has received much critical attention as one of his most effective and evocative skills. Not surprisingly, his early work appears, on the surface, to be a plausible reality-based fiction. I will argue that the predominance of the physical landscape and seascape in early stories is gradually eclipsed in later work by a submerged internal landscape of memory, through which respective narrators travel in search of their identity. In other words, although MacLeod does employ significant experiential realism, he does so in order to frame the alternate psychological realm in which he reveals the mutability of cultural identity and consciousness, the processes of collective memory and thought, and the osmosis by which events of the physical world are absorbed and retained in the emotional world of the individual.

To MacLeod's narrators, their own identities and remembered experience seem convergent, but a chronological examination of this work reveals an evolving divergence as well. As the dominance of the environment over human existence gradually recedes as a central focus in earlier work, the alternate psychological landscape of memory uncovers a submerged awareness of the self, and later narratives begin to pursue an identity that is transcendent. While MacLeod's narratives capture the external manifestations of the culture of the land, they move gradually toward uncovering a submerged culture of the spirit. This is the central journey that characterizes his work as a whole.

The majority of stories from The Lost Salt Gift of Blood, discussed here in Chapters I and II, are primarily concerned with the occupational culture of Western Cape Breton Island and the human crises brought on by economic

upheaval and necessary outmigration. These stories constitute a sustained and very focused examination of the family as the most influential force upon the characters' early experience and development. As a body of individual stories, each comprises one fragment of a long journey of self-discovery. They may be seen as stages of awareness, beginning with memories that represent the initial departure from childhood in "In the Fall" and "To Everything There is a Season", in which a capsulized event or crisis is rendered that reveals a moment from childhood which contains profound implications for the narrator's understanding of his own situational reality. The father/son relationship is the central thematic vehicle for MacLeod's treatment of themes of initiation and trust, a relationship detailed through memory in which the harboured emotional impulse is a sense of betrayal. These are, to be fair, male stories that deal exclusively with masculine inadequacies, relationships and conflicts. They cannot be classified, however, as endorsements of accepted notions of masculinity; rather, they explore a submerged struggle of fathers and sons with the expectations imposed upon males by the family itself. The motivation of the narrators of these stories, and of the story "Winter Dog", is the burden of their own sense of failure, and their perception of failure on the part of their fathers.

The family and the father/son relationship remain a central focus in "The Boat", "The Vastness of the Dark", and "The Return", and these three stories, discussed in Chapter II, deal most thoroughly with the theme of occupational tradition. The narrative scope of these broadens to accommodate the narrator's evolving perspective as he moves toward the slow and difficult transition of youth. The pivotal aspect of these stories is the difficult choice to leave the community, intensified by the conditions surrounding such a decision, and conditioned by the long term gestation of memory. A common thread among these narrators is their conflicted position within families and communities for



whom an appropriate, and in extreme cases the only conceivable future, is ultimately a duplication of the past.

Outwardly, the stories published in the period between 1968 and 1975 dramatize the way that some inefficiency in either traditional occupations or culture forces the more energetic young people into exile or some other accommodation to modernity. Typically, the narrators in these stories focus on the time when, on the verge of manhood, they feel blocked from continued existence at home. Not surprisingly, their thresholds and barriers are of concern to MacLeod on both the experiential and psychological levels. The conflicts between narrators and their families are manifested in the act of choosing or being caught between Cape Breton and the broader world. Inwardly, the young men are dislocated by whatever alternative they choose. But the fiction dramatizes best the psychological consequences of enforced abandonment of secure identity based on cultural isolation for an insecure one based on improved economic prospects. When they begin to delve into their unresolved past as narrators, they initiate their latent search for themselves. It is not the conclusion of this identity crisis, but the process of self-searching and slow discovery that is rendered so intricately.

MacLeod's insight into his local people and history is intensified by a grasp of the uncertainty and doubt experienced by the generation of his era. In a broad context, the individual alienation that he details so intimately reflects the private human cost of wider shifts in society: the growth of the urban identity, professionalization, and the intensifying pressure on rural continuance during the post-war period. The community of which his fictional landscape speaks is roughly the Western side of the island, a traditionally rural area characterized by localized fishing and coal mining industry, and a high component of farming and forestry. Western Cape Breton Island was characterized by a highly

localized and considerably isolated way of life well into the twentieth century, neglected by the institutions of government up until the post war period. The increased presence of government programs, and structural changes in transportation and industry such as mechanization and labour surplus, increasingly progressive communication technologies, a rise in support for formalized education, and the decline of local markets, contributed to the post war structural shift experienced by its communities, beginning in the 1950's. The swift introduction of all of these factors to the region contributed to a formula for decline, as economic stagnation, the inability to compete, and outmigration continued increasingly to burden the population.<sup>4</sup>

These economic and demographic transformations are well documented, as is the damage to the Scots-Gaelic community and culture which suffered a considerable depletion of population. Background information can help provide a context for the reality-based foundation of MacLeod's fictional landscape. Charles Dunn's Highland Settler<sup>5</sup> is a classic study of the Cape Breton Gaelic culture at mid-century and its immigrant roots. It documents the state of the language and cultural traditions which faced a double threat of modernization and outmigration of the younger generation. In tracing the Gaelic roots of Eastern Nova Scotia, Dunn is able to reconstruct aspects of a transplanted culture that prospered throughout the nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth. Although Scots-Gaels were present in the area as early as 1790, the major influx of Highland emigrants peaked in the 1820's, and ceased as a major influence in the 1850's.<sup>6</sup> The arrival of Scots-Gaelic immigrants and their presence in Cape Breton is a matter of record, striking in its intensity and

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<sup>4</sup> J.L. Pepin, "Life and Poverty in the Maritimes", (Ottawa: ARDA Report, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> D. Campbell, and R.A. MacLean, Beyond the Atlantic Roar, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974.

complex in its organization. The manner of the influx, concentrated within time frames, and family and community ties that survived the migration intact, resulted in a remarkably identifiable population density within the nineteenth century settlements and villages of the island. The community cohesion in a rural area like Inverness county, for example, would have not only ethnic and cultural support, but a dense network of familial and previously existing community ties underlying it. At that time, Inverness County was home to a high density of Gaelic speaking persons and dominated by farming, lumbering, and fishing settlements.

The introduction of coal mining in 1890 caused a shift from this orthodox rural economy to one divided between independent subsistence and waged labour in the towns of Inverness and Port Hood.<sup>7</sup> The benefits and implications of this included a rise in the population of these towns at the expense of the countryside, and the positioning of cash income as an alternative to subsistence livelihood based on goods and services. A pluralistic livelihood in which seasonal wage labour complemented domestic production and subsistence activity became common to the area. The instability of the mining industry itself, fluctuating in levels of production during the initial decades of the century created a trained work force, intermittently employed, and thus encouraged and tempted to find work elsewhere. Outmigration, then, was a permanent fact of life, and seasonal migration for labour purposes was not a temporary circumstance, but a lasting change in the society. The undeniable influence of these economic realities support a cultural perspective of Scots Communities in Cape Breton as somewhat temporary or transient ones where the Gaelic culture took refuge from the Highland migrations, only to suffer a later

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Samson, "Dependency and Rural Industry: Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1910", Contested Countryside (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994).

haemorrhaging of its peoples to the inner regions of Canada. Not surprisingly, there is a sense of repeated or duplicated exile in much of MacLeod's work in which outmigration in Cape Breton speaks to the outmigrants' ancestral history of separation and loss.

MacLeod is committed to an honest presentation of the occupational past and present, but moreover, he is an interpreter of the Scots-Gaelic identity, its persistence, and the subtle adaptations to change that create simultaneously a link to the past and a crisis in continuity. A discussion of his body of work as a whole provides the opportunity to examine his efforts at the development of a sustained ethnic character or range of characteristics that surface and resurface within individual stories. The consistencies that occur among a range of his characters contribute to a profound cultural identity whose roots lie in the Highland Scots past and emigrations to North America, and whose twentieth century struggles are subject to the waning population of its isolated communities, as well as its generational distancing from the emigrant group, and its pre-emigration ancestry. MacLeod not only records individual experience but traces collective cultural consciousness and identity through character. Although most important individual characters are identifiably Scots, the Scots-Gaelic culture manifests itself in the work metaphorically through a series of recurring motifs.

If the stories discussed in my first and second chapters concentrate on the pain of physical removal or separation of the post-war generation, Chapter III addresses more of those contained in As Birds Bring Forth The Sun which attempt the psychological reconstruction of a link to the place and the people left behind. A surfacing awareness of the submerged psychological damage caused by outmigration evolves in work published between 1976 and 1987. The thematic linkage of "The Road to Rankin's Point", the final story in The Lost

Salt Gift of Blood, and "The Closing Down of Summer", which begins As Birds Bring Forth the Sun, reveals quite succinctly MacLeod's shift away from the grip of the physical landscape, into the realm of collective memory in search of the origins of the transcendent Gaelic identity that arrived on nineteenth century Cape Breton Island. As a result, the physical setting plays a more ambiguous role in the stories discussed in Chapter III, where Cape Breton assumes the role of intermediary location in time between the Scottish Highlands and modern Canadian life.

Because MacLeod deals so consistently with the realm of memory, one must consider the deep psychological dimension of the work as well as the physical realm of the external forces and circumstances that shape it. Historical fiction, for example, works to place the reader in time, a place, a society, and frame of ideological and political reference. MacLeod places his reader in a fragile and translucent realm of the memory that guards the repressed emotional past, wherein the deepest human processes of thought and feeling are carried out.

The notion of the past as a continuum, shifted from the physical to the psychological plane, comprises a strong theme in the stories "Vision" and "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun". The ancestral past is a reality that dwells in memory, creating a collective existence that is shared generationally and continues to thrive in the consciousness. MacLeod's discussion of a cultural past is not developed through an external manipulation of characters around events or the societal shifts of decades and eras, but through a focus on the internal cyclical generations of the family, within which is the collective source of identity, tradition, knowledge, and personal history. The past is recorded and accessed through the memory of human activity and human accomplishments and is transmitted generationally. A close examination of his approach to this intimate

shared history reveals his repeated suggestion that this kind of knowledge, often perceived as a valuable insight into self discovery, is more often problematic, potentially volatile, and disruptive. The past is replete with human tragedy, with emotional disturbance, and with unresolved pain and despair, and these are not excluded from its communication.

The three stories discussed in Chapter IV, "The Closing Down of Summer", "The Tuning of Perfection", and "Island", illustrate MacLeod's dramatic departure from an essentially reality-based treatment of cultural identity into the realm of the conceptual. Two of these, "The Tuning of Perfection" and "Island", adopt the third person form, a technique which also suggests MacLeod's attempt to bring more objectivity to the narrative itself, as well as to the characters he creates. In all three stories, the external landscape functions most effectively as a metaphor for a cultural state of mind. Specific themes here include intergenerational communication failure, outside intervention in cultural practice, and the decline of the Gaelic language. These themes work within narratives that construct an experience which represents the state of the culture's integrity. Moreover, the protagonist of each story is convincingly developed as a representative symbol of the culture itself. The narrative structure of "Closing Down" is completely contained within the unexpressed internal contemplation of a career miner who laments the demise of the Gaelic language and intergenerational communication within his family and community. The narrator himself embodies physical, spiritual, and cultural death, and his poignant personal observations represent an elegy for the Cape Breton Gael. In the underground confinement of the coal mine, his crucial dependence on communication for survival is a metaphor for the dying of the language and a way of life. The later story "The Tuning of Perfection", expresses a remarkably different overview and attitude through its central

character, Archibald, a tradition bearer who reluctantly faces transition. His home on an isolated mountain again forms the fundamental symbolic representation of the culture itself, and his embodiment of the traditions that are crucial to its survival. Published separately in 1987, the story "Island" constitutes MacLeod's most conscious attempt to unify character and landscape. Its heroine, Agnes MacPhedran, comes to personify the tiny coastal island that bears her name and ancestral history. The last of her kind, she witnesses her own anonymity within the surrounding communities that eclipse her, before her eventual eviction and uncertain departure "to live somewhere else". The union of individual characters and landscape in these three stories represents MacLeod's most ambitious attempt at the construction of a shared cultural consciousness within his extensive pursuit of identity.

All of MacLeod's short stories are finely crafted studies; however, the ethnic and occupational aspects of the work do not qualify it as ethnography. In other words, the realistic elements of setting and historical accuracy are not the central objective of the work. In fact, the presentation and portrayal of lives and livelihoods characteristic of the area often work to subvert accepted notions of occupational identity. For example, the fisherman father in the "The Boat", and the coal miner father in "Vastness" do not conform to the expectations placed upon them by their individual occupations and roles within the community. The constructed external realities of the setting are often presented in direct opposition to, or as a severe limitation upon the lives and aspirations of characters. MacLeod reveals occupational culture and identity through the struggle of individuals to comply with expectation, an exploration which produces a series of complex psychological character studies.

MacLeod does not design specific character traits produced by the nature of the setting, but rather he reveals underlying currents of tendency and

inclination, preexistent and submerged, their origins mysterious and their presence in need of reconciliation. The physical brutality of occupation, the harshness of the elements, the incessant labour, and the threat of death at sea, in the woods, or in the mines, are deposited within an already unsettled character. Frequently his people are embedded with, or have inherited, a strong sense of reproach and deep angst. These traits are prevalent in the fathers who appear in "The Boat", "Vastness", and "In the Fall", for example, and are implied with regard to the grandfather figure in "The Road to Rankin's Point". It seems as though their burden of dissatisfaction with themselves, their frustration, and a similar sense of stifled urge and selfish recklessness mirror not only the bleak circumstances of the present, but are a semi conscious response to a murky and unresolved past. In stories like "The Road to Rankin's Point" and "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun", characters' relative distance from or proximity to their cultural selves is developed through a compelling yearning for, and conversely, a rejection of the culture's ambivalent presence in their lives. A deep-seated anger or resentment emerges in the character who acknowledges why striving toward a cultural self is necessary. This conflict is demonstrated to some degree through the development of the oppositional forces of tradition and modernity. The conflicted character is revealed to be the one who is in some way aware that the darkness and uncertainty of the past remain a dominant force in his own condition. The narrator of the earlier story "The Boat", for example, struggles to reconcile his acquired identity as an urban professional with his inherited one as the only son of a Cape Breton fisherman. The narrator of "As Birds" makes several attempts to deny the emotional weight of his ancestry in exchange for the convenience of his modern individual identity. The family, therefore, or more specifically the evolving generations within family, are the vehicles for the dramatization of this concept.



Particularly dominant within the narrative is the family in conflict, its severed bands of communication, and its rootedness in both place and connection to the past. On one level, individual members may bear the inherited scars of poverty, isolation, violence, and displacement. On a more obscure plain, their shared existence and the essence of their relationships reveal a symptomatic self-reproach and destructive tendency to inflict these cultural deprivations psychologically from one generation to the next. In the story "The Closing down of Summer", for example, the Gaelic language is portrayed as an internalized one that has lost the external capacity for communication and become submerged in the psyche. The concept of an intergenerational breakdown in communication through the silencing of language creates a collective state of mind in which withdrawal and isolation from each other is inherited. The castrated abilities of the language thus become associated with the past, implying the dwellers of the present are in a sense both deaf and dumb to each other. Many of MacLeod's characters, and most effectively his narrators, seek to overcome the inheritance of a damaged cultural psyche through acceptance and reconciliation with the past. And as representatives of a collective state of mind, these characters inhabit the precipice between the unconscious pull of oppositional forces: the past and the present, ambition and sacrifice, acknowledgement and self-denial, compliance and resistance, and the outward self and the emotional state.

The interlocking aspects of experiential realism and psychological subtext make it difficult to place this work in the context of Canadian literature. History itself is a crucial element in these stories, but it is often implicit and therefore does not create the expository event-based recreation of Thomas Raddall for instance. As discussed, MacLeod prefers first person narrative in relating the past through memory. A useful comparison might be Percy Janes'

House of Hate,<sup>8</sup> also concerned with the family, the effects of departure, and a first person account of impressions of community and identity. But Janes' narrator, JuJu, is methodical in the relation of detail. He is also detached and judgmental, practised and contrived in his observations and references to himself. MacLeod's narrators expose little about themselves directly to the reader. Through the telling, they imply many questions for which they do not provide answers, nor are they concerned with doing so.

In terms of the rural realities that MacLeod constructs, David Adams Richards might be considered to attempt something similar. But Richards's cultural content is often subject to a political agenda whose central objective is to illustrate poverty and inequity. In Road to the Stilt House,<sup>9</sup> for example, the narrative is sufficiently consumed by the psychological entrapment of the setting to overwhelm the dimension of time. The past is only at times relevant to his account, and the implicit future of his characters sacrificed to a capsule of present tense confinement. Margaret Laurence's "Manawaka series" is the most comparatively useful in its recreation of a rural setting and the complexity of cultural identity submerged below a mistakenly simplistic exterior. Laurence's concern with the difficult oppositional forces within the Scots identity is also worth noting, as is her approach to the creation of character, often through static memories or a continuous remembered time frame. Her careful attention to the subtle suggestion of culturally learned behaviour is relevant to MacLeod's technique of revealing the essence of character through the withheld or unspoken response. The composite character that emerges is subject to a fierce self-restraint, an unyielding resistance to open communication, and an overwhelming burden of stifled emotion. Laurence's

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<sup>8</sup> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1985.

most memorable and brilliantly executed narrators, Hagar Shipley of The Stone Angel,<sup>10</sup> and Morag Gunn of The Diviners,<sup>11</sup> are consumed by an inner struggle against their own relentless pride, a burden they know to be a product of their Scots heritage that is reinforced by their incomplete knowledge of bitter and tenacious ancestral history. They are conditioned and to some degree victimized by this knowledge throughout their search for reconciliation with their own pasts. Many of MacLeod's narrators embark on a similar journey. It is not pride, however, but restless longing for home that compels them toward their heritage of bitter loss and fractured identity. The past they uncover is consistently dark and troubled, and remains a force concealed and empowered by time and memory. It is in fact his narrators' ability to communicate the power of this force that distinguishes his work. In a Canadian context, it is his ability to sustain a cultural consciousness, and expand it throughout a body of work that represents a major achievement.

Although his is not autobiographical fiction, the fact that MacLeod's creative process most often employs a first person narrative is of importance to his creation of emotional intensity. Entering into a MacLeod story does not convey to readers a sense of being told and explained to. Instead they are invited into the intimacy of a confession. In stories like "In the Fall", and "The Return", the narrative begins by establishing the remembered time frame immediately, drawing the reader directly into the world of the past. His narrative technique shifts slightly in later stories, such as "Vision", to incorporate a more developed present tense reality, and to access both collective memory and ancestral history in order to move beyond individual experience and identity. What remains thematically consistent is the relevance of the past, either

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<sup>10</sup> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974.

remembered or learned, to the momentary present tense experience. It may be argued that the frequent desire of narrators to reconcile themselves emotionally with what they know intellectually is autobiographically inspired. MacLeod's use of first person indicates that the marriage of his intellectual understanding of the Gael of Western Cape Breton, and a personal introspective journey through the emotional self both serve the creative process. His skillful construction of a natural landscape setting, and his cultivation of complex and sophisticated cultural themes converge to house characters who demand an intellectual understanding. However, they communicate on a highly emotional channel as well, revealing the author's exceptional control over his subject. Perhaps it is not only the fusion of the factual and the conceptual, but the recognition of the knowable and the unsolvable that distinguishes MacLeod's treatment of the Scots-Gaelic identity. The acknowledgement of a kind of human puzzle both complicates his efforts and generates the emotional force behind his work. It is not that he provides definitive conclusions and answers, but that he asks profound questions of himself and his reader.

Writing in 1977, after the publication of his first collection of short stories, MacLeod reflected on the fragility of cultural essence, and the often fleeting glimpses of understanding experienced by its bearers:

All questions of such a nature are self-defeating in the depth of their complexity. Still, at times we like to try. We are attracted, in our curiosity, to nibble away at the edges of such mystery; perhaps in the vague hope that we may not so much solve the question for all time as that we might better "understand" it and in so doing gain a better understanding of ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative journey contained in MacLeod's stories seeks to render a forum in which questions that elude definite answers may at least open themselves to speculation.

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<sup>12</sup> Mabou Pioneers. Mabou: Pioneer Committee Private Publication, 1977.

## Chapter I

### Memory and Narrative Voice

I have selected the stories "In The Fall", "To Everything There is a Season", and "Winter Dog" to begin my analysis of MacLeod's work. While these are among the simpler or more accessible tales of MacLeod, they are not without their own complexity of organization and theme when examined in detail. They are the stories which can be recommended to readers as a way into MacLeod's world or even possibly as suitable texts for younger readers. Although school boards would probably not adopt a story like "In the Fall" because of its language, this one is at least available in a powerful film version produced in Manitoba during the 1980's. These stories provide an excellent opportunity to observe the development of MacLeod's use of first person technique, his dominant narrative method during the late 1960's and through the 1970's. Only one early story employs the third person.<sup>13</sup>

The three stories discussed here are all from the period 1973-81 when he worked exclusively through character narrators, particularly those who remembered and spoke out of a Cape Breton boyhood. I will examine these first because they present a MacLeod who conforms to the naturalistic mode which many critics see as his particular strength as a writer. It is central to my purpose to show that MacLeod's work goes far beyond this limited orientation.

"In the Fall", "To Everything There is a Season", and "Winter Dog" share several common themes and motifs, and particularly a narrative structure based on adult memories of a specific boyhood crisis. Although these stories seem

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<sup>13</sup> "The Golden Gift of Grey", obviously an apprentice piece, written during the late 1960's while he was a graduate student in Indiana, and published first in Twigs VII, 1971. Collected in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood. He did not return to the form until he published "The Tuning of Perfection" in 1984.

thematically limited to issues of male initiation because they deal with the approach to and passing through of a threshold, be it childhood to youth, or boy to man, they contain significant additional elements which transform them into more universal statements. Elements of both age and gender identity are clearly present in the dramatized experiences. These are also strongly atmospheric narratives effectively employing the evocation of land and seascapes. An element of sacrifice is present in all three, albeit in vastly different contexts. An association with domestic animals in each story works to provide insight into the often taciturn characters and the complex and covert nature of their relationships. Each is a memory story that constitutes the adult contemplation of a time from the past that bore long term significance in the narrator's understanding of his parents and thus of himself. The overriding emotion attached to these moments of intensity is a combination of the child's desire to change circumstances of difficulty and struggle, and the helplessness with which he observes the situation. These are most effectively and essentially stories about family, and the relationships that evolve within them. They are, in essence, captive moments of emotional intensity, in which the narrative pace is frequently slowed to a standstill.

The issue of narrative voice is central to all of these stories, each one being a remembered series of events imbued with a latent emotional and psychological response. The narrators are boys or very young men, whose respective ages during the remembered time frame range from eleven to fourteen; however, the voices with which the stories are recounted are those of the adults they have become, and are permeated with the long term gestation of emotional responses that were repressed or concealed at the time and over the years. Therefore the scope of the reconstructed past is not necessarily limited by the vision and perceptions of childhood. The emotional intensity of "In The

Fall" and "To Everything There is a Season" owes much to the first person technique as a way of dramatizing a crisis in the family which results directly from the pressure of economic change and the exploitative approach to the resource sector by the market economy. The crisis in "Winter Dog" is more personal. The outmigration and economic crisis that pervade the other stories is implicit, and the focus of the story is on the grown up son's need to finally deal with his resentment against his dying father.

The opening paragraph of each story is crucial in establishing a voice of the present that introduces the past as a self-contained memory, retained in detail, and recounted for its personal relevance. This is the precise entry point into a narrative that maintains a strong intimacy through its first person detail, and throughout its course, expands to incorporate and express themes of universal significance.

"In the Fall",<sup>14</sup> the opening story in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood, is a finely crafted and strongly atmospheric story of family conflict on a small Cape Breton farm during the 1950's. This was a decade of severe marginalization in the agricultural sector. The household remembered by the narrator, James, is a subsistence farm, supported partly by his mother's work raising chickens and by the wages of his father who migrates seasonally to find labour in the city. Work cutting pulpwood and fishing mentioned early in the story were common in the area after the closure of the nearby coal mines, but in terms of agriculture there were only unstable local produce markets. MacLeod's patient attention to

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<sup>14</sup> First published in Tamarack Review, 1973. Textual references here are to the collection The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.

detail is in favour of a realistic portrayal of life and livelihood. The story is, however, more pointedly a study of the family, which employs economic necessity and sacrifice to explore a deeply human terrain. The narrative turns on the device of the horse, Scott, whose condition, worth, and fate are both the source of conflict and the symbol of declining hope. A pervasive sense of the family's despair is conveyed through description of the harsh conditions of weather and landscape. The isolation of family members from one another is paralleled by the isolation they dwell in between the coal mine and the sea, neither resource having much to offer them in terms of spiritual or material sustenance.

James's introduction of each parent is crucial to the subtlety with which MacLeod renders this slow and hushed series of events. The frank practicality of his mother forms the opening line of the story, insisting that the horse be sold while money can still be had for him. She is presented as a forthright woman, only able to speak if her hands are busied, distracting her from the activity of merely speaking to verbalize a thought or a feeling. She clearly prefers work to contemplation of any kind, and her dedication to the running of the household is established early.

In James's careful description, the father is captured staring moodily out of the wind and rain whipped window at a treacherous November sea, lost in thought and seemingly removed from the situation in which he stands. In direct contrast to his wife, he is a softly greying figure, slender, and somewhat fragile as he stands in the window, troubled and silent. James reveals little about himself or his brother David, except their ages, fourteen and ten, and the fact that he cannot really remember a winter when his father was not away at work:

My father has always worked on his land in the summer and at one time he would spend his winters within the caverns of the coal mine. Later when he could bear the underground no longer, he had spent



November to April as an independent coal hauler or working in his woodlot where he cut timbers for the mine roofs support...Now each winter he goes to Halifax but he is often a long time in going. He will stand as he does now, before the window, for perhaps a week or more and then he will be gone. (LSGB, 8)

James's father's world appears distant in terms of location, and in the sense that it is largely one focussed on the past, perhaps a time when he was more content. The family has six children who all miss their father. His sons, whose identification with their father is limited by his consistent absence, romanticize the events he communicates to them. In contrast to the mother's domain, a harsh one of sacrifice and necessity, his world espouses ideals of masculinity, of independence, and of physical and moral strength, all of which are related to the loyalty of his horse, Scott:

My father had been his driver for two winters in the underground and they had become fond of one another and in the time of the second spring, when he left the mine forever, the man had purchased the horse from the Company so that they might both come out together to see the sun and walk upon the grass. (LSGB, 9)

James's mother is a study in denial and repression of emotional response. Her inability to speak without distracting herself with work of some kind is an example of her refusal to contemplate or reflect upon the dire circumstances in which they live. This she disguises as a dedication to work, clinging to the belief that labour will be rewarded, idleness punished. Her denial of emotional response is clearly a result of continuous struggle, revealed by the fact that she values her husband's wages more than his emotional support. His return home from Halifax has resulted in lost wages and this is for her an unforgivable expense. She infers that six children are a burden that she alone bears throughout the winter. Aside from her maternal and domestic identity, her activities are considerably concerned with the raising of capons as

a source of income on the local seasonal market. Her reasoning in the raising of this particular breed of capon is sound and pragmatic. James contemplates their existence differently:

Sometimes I like them and sometimes I do not. The worst part seems to be that it doesn't really matter. Before Christmas they will be killed and dressed and then in the spring there will be another group and they will always look and act and end in the same way. It is hard to really like what you are planning to kill and almost as hard to feel dislike. . . but the capons we are responsible for and encourage them to eat a great deal, and try our best to make them warm and healthy and strong so that we may kill them in the end. (LSGB, 12)

James is torn between pity and shame, an uneasiness that is shared by his father: "My father is always uncomfortable around them and avoids them as much as possible" (LSGB, 12). He senses that his father is uncomfortable, not with the labour associated with them, but with their cultivation for slaughter. His father draws a sharp distinction between earnings from labour, and capitalizing on the sacrifice of animals. His mother's immunity to the futility surrounding the existence of the capons and their false comforts suggests a willing disregard for the integrity of life. It is in this context that Scott enters the story. The mother considers the much needed income from his sale; the father desires a dignified and comfortable death in gratitude for loyal service.

The presence of Scott in the story is crucial to the narrative. It is the horse's worth that is the source of conflict. Scott has symbolic value, embodying past activity outside the domestic realm: the coal mine, the hauling of coal, and working in the woods. Now old and lame, and having nothing to do with the functioning of the farm, he is a burden to the mother, and his representative value is all that remains. This value is different for the father. For him, Scott is the past he values; for her, the animal represents a past that is gone and that she does not want to be reminded of. There is a battle between the moral and the material, intensified by poverty and need.

The contrast in material value of Scott and the capons is a metaphor of the lower value of the past and the higher value of the future. The former embodies an era of independent production and pluralistic labour practices; the latter, a chain of futile dependency. It is James's initiation to these harsh realities that forms the basis for MacLeod's exploration of the human costs of poverty. For him, his mother's victory represents the defeat of their own humanness, and descent into the wheels of the market economy. Scott's preservation would mean a sacrifice of the family's sustenance; conversely, his sacrifice is a help toward their preservation.

The repulsive drover MacRae, who comes to purchase Scott and ultimately destroy him, is a device to represent this gradual dehumanizing slide toward the encroaching market economy. He is only vaguely human, and his brutality toward Scott and a bull already tethered in his wagon is inhumane, but not unrealistic. The climax of the story, the father's betrayal of Scott, is perceived as an act of cowardice by his sons. The defencelessness of the animal and later of the capons as well is the most dominant parallel in the story, mirroring the children's helplessness to avert their circumstances or control their situation.

It is a feeling of loss and shame, but also of compliance which in turn leads to David's violent disposal of the chickens in retaliation for the sale of Scott. David expresses the rage they all feel but cannot release. He lashes out against what they have become: falsely secure, dependent, helpless, futile, and awaiting slaughter. His adoption of the voice of MacRae, calling his father a cocksucker, reveals his descent to the level of the drover and his removal from the realm of human respect for life. His actions equate his father with Scott, for whom no respect was given. They struggle against the elements, MacRae included, but more importantly against themselves in the urge to remain human

in an extremely dehumanizing atmosphere.

James's continuing despair over the death of Scott is MacLeod's subtextual comment on the symbolic demise of a way of life. The universality of "In The Fall" evolves from its recognition of the human casualties of the approaching economic shift which replaced a human relationship to the land with a material dedication to mass production.

The emotional intensity of the story, however, is expressed through the painful divisions of the family itself, victimized by the indifference of these external forces. James remembers this event clearly for a reason; it is not a random recollection of childhood. He continues to resent his father for his passivity, perhaps semi-subconsciously, and exhibits repressed feelings of confusion and betrayal. This harboured resentment is the crux of the story, and the motivational impulse for its telling. James's latent regret is an attempt at reconciliation and forgiveness. MacLeod's concluding image, in which the mother and father appear transformed and stubbornly resilient in their intense embrace indicates his renewed hope for the triumph of the human spirit through love and shared strength. James, however, seeks out David, sensing his brother's abilities to both "understand" and respond as exceeding his own, a further indication of James's confusion and unresolved emotion.

Not unlike James, the eleven year old narrator of "To Everything There is a Season"<sup>15</sup> resists crossing the threshold to the harsh realities of adulthood. The season of the title is not only a reference to its Christmas setting, but to the cycles of life that determine the journey from childhood into maturity. In a

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<sup>15</sup> First published in The Globe and Mail, December 24, 1977. Textual references here are to the collection As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.

memory play introduced through a direct address to the reader, the narrator, in a prelude section, states his uncertainty about the accuracy of memory, "for Christmas is a time of both past and present and the two are often imperfectly blended. As we enter into its nowness, we often look behind" (*As Birds*, 61). The story is dominated thematically by the fragility of hope, and the concept of the approach and passing of a threshold is again present, as is the loss of innocence. The household is similar to that of the family situation in "In the Fall", where the instability of small scale farming activity has been subsidized by the father's increasing labour in the coal mine. The narrator is approaching a position in the family of responsibility and masculine example. His father is a shadowy and fragile figure whose chronic physical condition reflects the exhaustion of life and opportunity in the tiny west Cape Breton community. His older brother Neil, an outmigrant to Ontario who has assumed a parental role in the eyes of his younger siblings, is the symbol of independence and strength for the family. The narrator yearns for Neil's holiday return because he senses encroaching and lasting change and the probability that it will be his last Christmas within the secure conditions of childhood.

The narrator contemplates his position and the aging of his parents, and acknowledges his resistance toward the approaching season of later youth. MacLeod parallels this precarious threshold with the irrevocable discovery of the falsehood of Santa Claus, a point of no return on the journey toward adulthood.

It is true that at my age I no longer really believe in him yet I have hoped in all his possibilities as fiercely as I can; much in the same way, I think, that the drowning man waves desperately to the passing ship on the high sea's darkness. For without him, as without the man's ship, it seems our fragile lives would be so much more desperate (*As Birds*, 62).

His unwillingness to give up this innocent belief signifies his inability to accept the reality of the limited options he faces as an adult male: death or departure, personified by his father and Neil. The details of the Christmas Eve are picturesque and sentimental in their recreation of a holiday that was probably the last in which the narrator was so innocently secure. When he is invited to join with adults for the first time, he imagines "It is as if I have suddenly moved into another room and heard a door click lastingly behind me. I am jabbed by my own small wound" (*As Birds*, 68). His father remarks: "Every man moves on . . . but there is no need to grieve, he leaves good things behind." He refers to all of them simultaneously: the passing of the threshold, his own impending death, and his sons' inevitable migration away from the community. The story preserves a moment in the collective lives of the family in which imminent change was acknowledged, a change that was merely part of the cycle of existence. The narrative voice contains a lament for this past, not as an idyllic one, but wrought with the painful acknowledgement of continuous flux. The static quality of the narrative suggests the narrator's desire not for a return to the past, but for a pause for reflection. This contemplation is in essence, the desire to change the unchangeable, and to halt the relentless cyclical motion of time. His capture of his boyhood family in the "tableau of their care", is an attempt to regain briefly the essence of his own childhood.

"Winter Dog"<sup>16</sup> is the strongest conflict-driven story from *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, and it is consistent with "In The Fall" and "To Everything" in terms of the thematic treatment of the father/son relationship, lingering resentments from poor communication within a crisis situation, and the stirring of a memory

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<sup>16</sup> First published in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 1981. Textual references here are to the collection *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*.

by the narrator's present condition. The narrative structure of "Winter Dog" is somewhat of a departure, however, in which the present tense setting in southern Ontario forms a more extensive portion of the story. The narrator speaks very consciously as a father in recalling his childhood relationship with his own father. In the opening lines, he is presented in a state of anxiety and expectation, awaiting news of his dying father on distant Cape Breton Island. The impending death creates a suspended sense of reflection and contemplation in which the narrator reluctantly "considers possibilities" that will accompany the inevitable phone call. Suffering from insomnia, he observes his children playing with a neighbour's dog after an early morning snowfall. This "Ontario dog" reminds him of his own boyhood companion, purchased through the mail from Ontario and greeted with much expectation like a "planned child", but who failed at the tasks for which he was acquired and was deemed a waste of money and energy. MacLeod works with extremes in contrasting winter imagery in the presentation of the narrator's childhood anger and his present resignation. The silent and beautiful snowfall in which the present dog plays joyously with the children invokes his memory of the fierce velocity of the winter storm on the ice fields where he would have perished but for the dog upon whose body and instinct his survival depended.

The deceptions of the landscape and his failure to trust the natural instincts of the dog led to his peril:

I remember thinking how very warm it was because I was working hard and perspiring heavily. When the dog came back he was uneasy, and I realized it was starting to snow a bit but I was almost done. He sniffed with disinterest at the seal and began to whine a bit, which was something he did not often do. (*As Birds*, 49)

But it is his desperate trust in the dog that pulls him from the water and leads him home across the treacherous winter seascape. He recognizes

instantly his own careless disregard for nature. His unwillingness to be judged as a fool and fear of chastisement from his father prevent him from relating the events of the day to his family, but his bond with the dog is forever intensified. It is this secret bond between himself and the dog through which he assumes responsibility for its eventual destruction.

I learned later that my father had asked the neighbour to shoot him and that we had led him into a kind of ambush. Perhaps my father did so because the neighbour was younger and had a better gun or was a better shot. Perhaps because my father did not want to be involved.  
(As Birds, 56)

The narrator retains both the secretive knowledge of the dog's superior strength and loyalty, and lasting resentment toward his father for his own implication in its death. He is aware that it is destroyed because of its imposing strength, dominance over the other dogs, and unpredictable traits within his nature that contributed to a disposition that could not be trusted. He now shares a secret with the neighbour's dog as well: "I guess the owners and the rest of us think he's fenced in but he knows he's not. He probably comes out every night and leads a very exciting life. I hope they don't see his tracks or they'll probably begin to chain him" (As Birds, 43). The uncertainty of a blinding winter storm still separates the narrator from his home, disguised by the calm solemnity of the softly falling snow. His childhood experience has conditioned his acceptance of the destructive elements of nature: "Should we be drawn by death we may well meet our own" (As Birds, 57). The resignation he felt at the death of the golden dog he feels now in the face of his father's death: "It was too late and out of my control and even if I had known the possibilities of the future it would not have been easy" (As Birds, 57). The persistence of the dog in his memory is the persistence of the past in the distant locale in which he raises his own family. This is an intensely wrought emotional tale of will and fear, of



unexpressed gratitude and unresolved regret, but is dominated by the underlying presence of deception, both within nature and within human relationships.

Perhaps the strongest link among these stories is the memory of a father evoked by either an unresolved sense of either resentment or latent understanding. They are also MacLeod's most intensely atmospheric stories in which a sustained mood permeates the remembered time frame. The still cold of "To Everything" contributes to the static portrayal of a specific moment after which nothing was ever the same. The bundled security of the sleigh against the bitter chill of the clear winter night represents a crystallized memory of the last true Christmas of childhood. Both "In the Fall" and "Winter Dog" employ the harsh elements and deceptions of landscape to achieve a heightened tension in their treatment of survival. "In the Fall" does so somewhat more implicitly wherein the landscape is a consistent and relentless enemy that permeates the crisis but more effectively works to convey a sustained sense of despair and ongoing struggle. This mood is crucial to the pace of the story which at times draws to a standstill. The dramatic intensity that leads to the climax is somewhat subversive in its quiet constant suspense. Of the three, "In the Fall" is the most intricately textured story in which the relationship to the land is dualistically realized on both physical and spiritual levels.

The winter landscapes and seascape of "Winter Dog" bear a dual significance as well in their potential to provide and to threaten. The snowfall of the opening scene is both a quiet comfort and a source of joy that triggers the fear of its potential peril. The narrator of this story, however, in observing his own children, is compelled to acknowledge that his childhood remains a source

of unresolved anger and confusion about his own father. Not unlike James, he is haunted by an experience in which his father betrayed him, and yet he admittedly has "never told anyone about the days events." Grateful for his life, and facing the far away death of his father, he cannot forgive the killing of his dog. He must also assume responsibility for its death, just as James must acknowledge his own part in the sale of Scott. These relationships are about trust and betrayal, for which the loyalty of an animal is the obvious parallel.

Perhaps "To Everything" is the most nostalgic of these works, although both "In the Fall" and "Winter Dog" contain subject matter that could be perceived as sentimental. What saves these stories from the basically melodramatic is a finely crafted atmosphere and sophisticated narrative technique. There is a great deal of difference between the overtly sentimental and the emotionally intense. The delivery is the key to this distinction. While MacLeod deals with subjects of sentimental value, he does not, however, make a direct attempt at empathy. The events being recounted through memory are not intended to draw sympathy for characters, but to acknowledge a past that continues to persist in the present of the narrator. The external events of "In the Fall" and "Winter Dog", namely the sacrifice of both animals, are not the central events of the narrative. It is the internal absorption of these crises and their repressed emotional impact which reveal the characters' inability to communicate with each other, emphasized by their communication with animals. The animals in these stories are devices which provide insight into the inadequate human relationships that surround them.

The reconstructed past attempts to reconcile the narrator with his present condition, which is not a lament, but a sensitive and realistic attempt at understanding. They are cathartic, but the emotional impact is derived from the reader's identification, not with the past itself, but with the present that remains

conditioned by the past. The reader is effectively moved by the intimacy of the atmosphere of "In the Fall" and "To Everything", and by the fierce intensity of "Winter Dog", but the lingering emotional response to each is an identification with the universality of the limitations of the parent-child relationship.

The taciturn fathers in these stories are unmistakably connected in terms of culturally acceptable masculine behaviour, a comment on the deficient communication that is a cyclical condition within family. On one level the relating or reliving of the events of the past is the narrator's attempt to delve into the silence and reserved world of the father whose behaviour affected him to a great degree but who was not called upon to explain or enlighten, nor did he volunteer to do so. These stories are very focussed, excluding both the dimension of the surrounding community of the past, and a sense of other family connections that reach beyond the generation of the narrators' fathers. Each one is, in this sense, an individualistic character study based on a singular remembered experience.

It is this group of stories and those examined in the discussion that follows which we can most accurately describe as naturalistic. The stories are oriented in time and place by factual realities, are intensely immediate in their settings, and arguably confined by them, and are characterized by narratives in which the physical world is severe, treacherous, and destructive. In two of these stories, the emotional and mental health of characters is heavily determined by the rigours of physical labour. The father in "In the Fall" has suffered emotionally and physically from his labour in the mines, and is further victimized by the subsequent loss of that vocation. In "To Everything", the narrator's father suffers from black lung, a chronic illness produced by long term underground labour. As a more central focus, "Winter Dog" constructs an external conflict between man and nature that borders on hubristic, in which the boy is

endangered by his own arrogance and further threatened by his ignorance of the dog's warnings. The theme of disregard for nature is not unrelated to its presentation in another MacLeod story, "Second Spring,"<sup>17</sup> where a boy fails in his attempts to predetermine the characteristics of an unborn heifer through control of the breeding process.

The remembered reality contained in these stories, however, filters events through the consciousness, so that the psychological dimension of the work transcends the confines of a naturalistic depiction of existence. The past is distilled into one self-contained memory; the pace of the narrative is often static, and the symbolic content of the story of utmost importance to its success. Each story is, in effect, a contemplation of the past, but it is not the external circumstances that are paramount. The inner or subconscious realm of the emotions is the medium through which the past is channelled. The narrative voice is a backward glance to moments of truth and revelation within the narrator's journey to emotional maturity; the external conflicts are merely elements of provocation. These are stories of painful acknowledgement through meditation, the reconstructed past revealing the complex barriers of covert communication and silence that prevented immediate understanding. As memory plays, their characters emerge from the narrator's present emotional distress, their words and actions cryptic and profound, their condition evoked only through a reflective voice and vision.

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<sup>17</sup> First published in Canadian Fiction Magazine, 1980, and collected in As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.

## Chapter II

### Outmigration and Identity

Three stories, "The Boat", "The Vastness of the Dark", and "The Return" were published between 1968 and 1971, and later collected in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood. They are closely related thematically, and constitute MacLeod's most focused and solid treatments of tradition. In these narratives, the rural occupational culture of western Cape Breton is the dominant force of conflict and change in the lives of characters. Within the opus of his work, these are indeed signature stories, particularly "The Boat" which was selected for the anthology *Best American Short Stories* in 1969. It is a powerful story of obligation, trust, and betrayal, characterized by a highly realistic portrayal of Cape Breton life within a fishing community. It is my objective in this discussion to reveal that MacLeod, although a gifted realist, is not only concerned with a plausible presentation of the past, but rather attempts to capture moments which reveal a complex period of cultural transition. The reflective voices that relate these stories recognize and, to a degree, embody an identity that falls victim to severe marginalization and outmigration.

With respect to the discussion in Chapter I, the first person form remains crucial to these narratives, and the parent-child relationship remains a central focus; however, the narrow focus on the family in isolation that is characteristic of the three previously discussed stories is broadened here to include the concept of community as well. These are sustained explorations of an occupational identity and tradition which has become an inter-generational obligation. Community held beliefs and expectations about the continuity of tradition both influence and intrude directly upon family relationships. Each

story employs a father-son relationship in which the transmission of tradition, in these stories fishing and coal mining, is a central element. The father characters, and grandfathers to some extent, are presented as dualistic figures, secure in their livelihoods, but resisting its limitations, and who simultaneously desire contentment and fulfilment for their sons. Against this background of the rooted father figure is the fact and fiction of youth outmigration. The narrative voice that recounts specific remembered events that were pivotal in their revelations and impact is in each story characterized by a sense of loss and irrevocable departure from tradition. These stories are generally more complex in structure and narrative perspective than the earlier group. Slightly removed from the narrative voices of "In the Fall", "To Everything", and "Winter Dog", in which latent regret or resentment permeated childhood memories, these men attempt to accept their own actions and their respective decisions to leave the community. The sense of lingering betrayal and disappointment is to a degree reversed as they struggle with their own failure to live up to parental expectation. It is their own introspection and self-judgment that constitute the meaningful insights present in these stories of self-discovery and loss. More importantly, an evolutionary change in the narrator's understanding of his world transpires throughout the recounting of these experiences, representing a departure from the captive recollections of the "In the Fall", "To Everything", and "Winter Dog".

The remembered events in each story take place during the 1950's and 1960's, when it was common for those working in fishing and coal mining sectors to pursue small scale agricultural and forestry activity, usually to subsidize earned wages. Labour in this sense, both wage and domestic, cultivates an identity determined by landscape and characters who are simultaneously nurtured and entrapped by it. By mid-century, the

marginalization of the fishing and mining sectors was already evident, and the threats to a traditional way of life and livelihood were many: industrialization, urbanization, centralization, increasing professionalism, and a rise in support for formal education. The decreasing economic stability of the area ultimately produced a labour surplus and outmigrants in search of work, and the presence of outmigration as a persistent reality is the foundation for MacLeod's in-depth treatment of the theme of exile and attempted return.

The blending of the corporal and the spiritual is a consistent and effective motif in these stories. Mutilation and damage suffered by the body often reflects the concealed wounds of a fragile spiritual counterpart. This motif corresponds to the dualistic journeys of the narrators toward physical destinations that are ambiguous and unknown, and their spiritual exile to a domain where they face transience and anonymity. This severe world of intense labour and physical hardship is a male one; thus, the relationships between mature and maturing male are the dominant ones within these narratives. The narrator of each story is a boy or a young man whose tentative assertion of masculinity is treated as an integral component of personal and cultural self-awareness. Generational shift has interceded to complicate this transformation considerably by the presentation of options. The narrators are both confused and betrayed by the dichotomy of their situation. The metaphoric roads that led their fathers deep into the community and the culture are suddenly linked and intersected with those that will take them away to unknown and mysterious roads of the mainland. The narrator's state of mind is often of two worlds, the cyclical insular culture of Cape Breton, already in the grips of severe decline and stagnation, and the potential larger world outside, existing only through second hand accounts and imagined locations. The narrators represent a generation who are compelled to see themselves as part of a North American society, rather

than geographically detached and ideologically isolated from the larger world. This is not expressed as a simplistic tension between past and present, rural and urban, labour and education, or traditional and modern, but in terms of complex and contradictory forces imposed by all of these external tensions upon the inner emotional world of the individual.

The opening lines of "The Boat"<sup>18</sup> present a clearly disturbed narrator, driven to relate the events of the story almost as a catharsis or therapeutic gesture on his own behalf. He is an anonymous and ghostly figure, haunted by the past, and his insomnia and nocturnal wandering are indications of psychological trauma, emotional distress, and isolation. His present state of mind is both disturbing and intriguing and the early introduction of the image of the boat as an object of love and torment is followed by a stark death image, indicating a traumatic past as the source of his distress.

This is not a coming of age story. The remembered past traces the narrator's approach over several years to a point where he must choose between fishing or pursuing his own ambition, a formal education and a profession away from his community. The narrator's position is one of naive confrontation with external forces that seek to determine the outcome of his dilemma. The story traces his gradual awareness of the conflict between individual ambition and inherited identity, and the obligation of being the only son in a traditional fishing family. These two opposing forces are represented by his parents. His early memories of their differences are conditioned by his inability to grasp the gap that exists between them in their marriage.

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<sup>18</sup> First published in The Massachusetts Review, 1968. Anthologized in Best American Short Stories, 1969. Textual references here are to The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.



backgrounds, and personalities. His mother, the namesake of their boat *Jenny Lynn*, is an unbending traditionalist from a long standing fishing family within the community, in which the expectation of continuing the tradition is a given, and it is foregone that her only son will inherit the boat and livelihood from her husband: "My mother was of the sea as were all of her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned with her dark and fearless eyes" (LSGB, 109).

His father is less restrained by expectation and conformity. He is for the most part silent and subdued, escaping through books and magazines in the solitude of his room. The narrator's description of the household reveals the degree to which they are incompatible, and implies that his birth represented the end of their sexual relationship:

My mother despised the room and all it stood for and she had stopped sleeping in it after I was born. She despised disorder in rooms and in houses and in hours and in lives, and she had not read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time. Still the room remained, like a rock of opposition in the sparkling waters of a clear deep harbour, opening off the kitchen where we really lived our lives, with its door always open and its contents visible to all. (LSGB, 111)

His father appears to live with them in a world apart that is both a refuge and a mystery. However, it is to the father that the daughters of the family turn late at night for advice and compassion in the face of the harsh judgments of their self-righteous mother. The division of the household parallels the narrator's own situation growing up in an isolated community dedicated to ordered continuity: adjacent but not immune to the presence of the larger mysterious world which is perceived as one that lies in opposition to their own.

As the youngest child and only male, the narrator will approach a threshold in terms of age and understanding of the circumstances. He is torn

between his burgeoning individual identity and his obligation to the place his mother prepares for him. With the passage of time, the divided positions of his parents become more antagonistic as they descend upon his own. For his sisters, the situation appears to be less complex: marriage to outsiders protects them from the painful choice that he faces. The activities of his older sisters generate conflict between his parents as each one departs the community, decisions resented by his mother and encouraged by his father. He is rudely awakened upon witnessing an argument between them, during which he feels himself "age from ten to fifteen", and after which his father agrees to entertain tourists in his boat and afterward at their guest cottages, an action taken specifically to spite his wife. The narrator's reaction to his father's singing of traditional seafaring songs and Gaelic ballads for their entertainment is both revealing and perplexing:

I was just approaching the wharf to deliver my mother's summons when he began, and the familiar yet unfamiliar voice that rolled down from the cabins made me feel as I had never felt before in my young life or perhaps as I had always felt without really knowing, and I was ashamed yet proud, young yet old and saved yet forever lost, and there was nothing I could do to control my legs which trembled nor my eyes which wept for what they could not tell. (LSGB, 115)

The "familiar yet unfamiliar voice" is that of a father he has so far not fully understood nor recognized. It is after his father's display for the tourists that the narrator begins to see him as a deeply dissatisfied man, physically ill-suited to the conditions of his labour, and intellectually starved by the demands and limitations of his livelihood: "And I thought then to myself that there were many things wrong with all of us and all our lives and I wondered why my father, who was himself an only son, had not married before he was forty and then I wondered why he had" (LSGB, 121). The suggestion that his father married in order to conform to community expectations becomes further evidence of his

increasingly apparent discontent. Unlike the early reflections of physical strength and largess, details describing his father begin to indicate an incongruous portrait of a fisherman, transforming him from the giant who fearlessly commanded the boat to a stifled man wrought with doubts and regrets. The narrator mistakenly perceives his father's choice as noble sacrifice and thus justifies his own decision to "remain with him as long as he lived and we would fish the sea together" (LSGB, 122).

The ambiguous circumstances surrounding his father's death are further obscured by his cryptic statement, "I hope you will remember what you have said" (LSGB, 122), in the days preceding his disappearance from the stern of the boat. These words suggest his rejection of his son's wishes and imply that the boy will recall his words regretfully in connection with a future event. It is in this sense that judging the father's actions as sacrificial becomes problematic, in that he not only denies his son a father but implicates him in his own death. The cruelest of irony inverts the narrator's sacrifice of his aspirations, and his father's responding suicide, to produce an irrevocable tragedy from which the narrator struggles to be free. His father's death frees him of his promise, but not from the guilt and regret that continues to haunt him, nor from his own identity as the only son who chose to leave the tradition carried out by his father and grandfather before him. The symbol of death revealed by the cigarettes indicates not the singular experience of his father's suicide, but the collective extinction of a way of life:

At such times only the gray corpses on the overflowing ashtray beside my bed bear witness to the extinction of the latest spark and silently await the crushing out of the most recent of their fellows. And then because I am afraid to be alone with death, I dress rapidly, make a great to do about clearing my throat, turn on both faucets in the sink and proceed to make loud splashing ineffectual noises. Later I go out and walk the mile to the all night restaurant. (LSGB, 105)

The narrator's repeated escape to the 'comforting reality' of his profession represents his denial of the death of the fishing tradition for which his mother prepared him, and his own feelings of betrayal and complicity in its destruction. Furthermore, his mother is of no comfort, and it is perhaps she who loses the most in her blind fight for dominance in the life of her son.

The image of the *Jenny Lynn* has become his mother and his father: his constant companion and his relentless tormentor. He dwells only partially in the present, and crippled psychologically by his parents' actions, he remains in a nocturnal state of limbo, searching for a less painful closure to the past. The source of the narrator's present emotional state is not guilt for the death of his father but the irreconcilable doubt over his decision to leave home, a decision that would effectively fail the hopes and expectations of one of his parents. Although a situation that is extreme in its tragic consequences, MacLeod reveals the universal theme of misguided love and regret in the ongoing search for parents' approval even after their deaths. The relationship between occupational tradition and identity generates an acute personal crisis resulting in his inability to shed his own past and assume his new identity as a professor at a "great midwestern university". Within the parent child relationship conditioned by an obligation, trust, and dependency, MacLeod encapsulates the generational breakdown brought about by the modernizing society. The narrator's acknowledgement of the incompatibility of his parents addresses the exclusivity of tradition and modernity, but more poignantly the human cost of these colliding states of mind.

First published in 1968, "The Boat" represents an early examination of the generational identity crisis which characterizes MacLeod's thematic treatment of tradition. The foundation of the story is the parent-child relationship

in which the roles are somewhat reversed. A son assumes responsibility for the societal shift that necessitates his departure from the tradition for which he is prepared. His subsequent emotional distress evolves from conflicting feelings of abandonment and betrayal of his own parents and his struggle toward self-identity within the vast urban society he has chosen. The pull of the past is in effect the suffering of the powerless individual caught in the flux of shifting society that fails to compensate for the pain of geographic and cultural separation. If MacLeod agrees that the eclipse of tradition is an inevitability, he argues more fervently that the process of change is not devoid of immense personal loss.

"The Vastness of the Dark"<sup>19</sup> is a poignant attempt to incorporate humanity into a dehumanized industrial world that revolves within a cycle of labour and brutal economic hardship. As indicated by the metaphoric connotation of its title, it is one of MacLeod's most darkly atmospheric stories in which the confinement of the external world both cultivates and preserves spiritual deprivation. The external setting is a Cape Breton coal town in 1960, only a few short years after the Springhill mining disasters of 1956 and 1958. The darkness of the title refers to the physical darkness of the mine and the limitless darkness of youthful uncertainty that surrounds the narrator, James. Inter-generational relationships are strongly represented here, deepened by their traditional association with coal and the expectation for that association to prevail. MacLeod employs labour underground as a metaphor for the struggle to control the unpredictable and conquer the unknowable, a futile exertion that leads to deeper darkness and despair. The underground is both a physical space and a state of mind that contribute to an existence of absolute limitation.

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<sup>19</sup> First published in The Fiddlehead, Winter 1971. Textual references here are to The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.

James wishes to shed not only the physical surroundings of the town and the mine, with its coal-black houses and dingy streets, but the state of mind that it perpetuates.

MacLeod has placed James in a conspicuously isolated position within his own family, not unlike the demanding role imposed upon the narrator of "The Boat". The first born, conceived before marriage, he is the bridge between his parents and their younger children. He grew up relatively alone, segregated from his brothers and sisters in a room adjacent to that of his parents. He perceives his own conception dualistically as evidence of his parents' strong love and of their entrapment, and witnesses the conception of his siblings as reluctant duty to the church: "I would like to think somehow that it was different for them at my conception and that there had been joy instead of grim release. But I suppose we, all of us, like to think of ourselves as children of love rather than of necessity" (LSGB, 29). Economic necessity, pregnancy, poor education, all revolve within this cycle of dependency that James rejects.

James's father, a volatile and deeply frustrated man, clings to tradition in the dogged pursuit of mine labour decades after the exhaustion of the nearby coalfields. The replacement of legitimate operations with illegal, marginal or "bootleg" mines provides meagre and highly perilous labour for indeterminate periods of time. MacLeod presents the confinement of the underground as a compulsive addiction, a desperate yearning for the physical conquest over coal in which the barriers and breakthroughs are absolute. James knows his father's and grandfather's scarred and mutilated bodies both reflect and disguise the inner wounds of stifled fear and remorse. Alcohol numbs the physical pain of injury and partially blinds them to their own condition. "They had been so long in the darkness of the mine that their eyes did not know the light, and the darkness of the labour had become that of their lives" (LSGB.31). In reality they

are mining themselves, a slow and grinding self-destruction. The extractive nature of coal mining itself forms a metaphor for self-destruction in the active removal of the foundations of the community that sustains them. James expresses a loathing for the industry itself compounded by a resentment of its decline. He is uncertain which is worse, their enslavement to the mine, or its exhaustion: "And now, strangely enough, I do not know if that is what I hate and so must leave, or if it is the fact that now there is not even that mine to go to, and perhaps it is better to have a place to go that you hate than to have no place at all" (LSGB, 32). The dark despair of this situation is paralleled by James's uncertainty of the outside world to which he departs for unknown regions and locations. The situation he leaves behind is an utterly desperate one in which his father's chronic unemployment will take a toll on the family and possibly invite his death in a treacherous unsafe mine. His mother appears to have long ago accepted this potential reality, and her inability to see beyond their situation is expressed through her assumption that James departs for another mining community, Blind River. He is hurt by her implication that as their son, he would be incapable of something else, and her limited understanding reveals the degree of her mental slavery to a livelihood that threatens their lives daily. The metaphysical stranglehold of the mine, however, is most deeply deposited within his grandfather who, at a loss to explain his life's labour, resorts to a kind of conversational rhetoric he has borrowed from the romanticized stereotype of the coal mine: "Once you start it takes a hold of you, once you drink underground water, you will always come back to drink some more. The water gets in your blood. It is in all of our blood. We have been working in the mines here since 1873" (LSGB, 31). James perceives these sentiments for the self-delusions they are, a foolish romantic justification for the life of darkness and self-denial they conceal. James's objectivity is

derived from the precarious position of his generation, denied the mythologized glory days remembered by his father and grandfather.

The outset of the journey is permeated with the hot brightness of the sun, a stark contrast to the dampening darkness he seeks to abandon. Upon his departure, James's first decision is to assume the identity of an anonymous transient from Vancouver, a place he has never seen, but which seems distant and appealing. The travelling salesman from Ontario who picks him up is one of MacLeod's most halting devices. He is repulsive, not unlike the drover MacRae, crude and obscene, and rarely speaks without demoralizing or dehumanizing the subject he addresses. He rides in an expensive convertible, and upon their arrival in Springhill, a coal town victim in recent years to severe mining disasters, James recognizes himself for the first time. The salesman, who describes his sexual conquests over the lonely widows of communities on his circuit, makes a passing judgment on the community of Springhill: "I don't know what the people do around here now. . . . They should get out and work like the rest of us. The Government tries to resettle them but they won't stay in a place like Toronto. They always come back to their graveyards like dogs around a bitch in heat. They have no guts" (LSGB, 48).

The salesman's opinions and beliefs constitute a sudden revelation to James who by his exposure to the extremely limited perceptions of his companion, realizes his own less flagrant dismissal of the complexity of human struggle. James not only recognizes his own mother in the anguished and hopeless faces of passers by, but cringes at their obvious resentment of the car in which he rides and the license plates it bears. It is the dark and mournful location of Springhill that reveals that he has been guilty of a similar practice. Although aware of the restrictive and destructive effects of the coal mine, he too has judged his parents, grandparents, and himself solely on the basis of an



association with it:

And I am overwhelmed by the awfulness of oversimplification. For I realize that not only have I been guilty of it through this long and burning day but also through most of my yet young life and it is only now that I am doubly its victim that I begin vaguely to understand. For I had thought that "going away" was but a physical thing. And that it had only to do with movement and with labels like the silly "Vancouver" I had glibly rolled off my tongue; or with the crossing of bodies of water or with the boundaries of borders. And because my father had told me I was "free" I had foolishly felt that it was really so. (LSGB, 49)

The reference to the town of Springhill as a graveyard is a harsh literal description of a community of scarred survivors unable to leave the defunct mine that was a source of life and livelihood, and suddenly became the mass grave of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. MacLeod suggests that it is people who physically pursue the labour of mining, and that this pursuit in turn mines the people. The transformation of the mine to a grave announces the end of the coal mining tradition and the death of the towns supported by it.

As darkness falls, James catches a ride out of Springhill in the company of migrant miners in desperate pursuit of work underground in distant locations. They are on their way to Blind River and the indication that he will join them for a time is perhaps a suggestion of his newly discovered self-acceptance. As the car tunnels into the vast landscape of the oncoming night, James and his companions depart from the dying past into the darkness of an uncertain future. "The Vastness of the Dark" constructs a dark world inhabited by the dead and the dying and introduces a generation exiled from the cyclical trap of the coal mine into vast uncertainty. In 1960, the geographic migration of these labourers transporting their skills to unknown and uncertain locations was a temporary solution to indefinite unemployment at home, but James's voyage is an outward one into the vastness of experience from which one can never truly return.

The permanence of outmigration in the severing of tradition is the premise for "The Return,"<sup>20</sup> in which MacLeod broadens the scope of the narrative by employing a child narrator, Alex, who is generationally detached from the Cape Breton community by virtue of his father's migration. His perspective therefore addresses both locations through the growing awareness of his grandfather, his father Angus, and himself, revealing a fractured three tiered relationship that represents the continuum and shift of past, present, and future. The community and tradition that is the focus of this story is characterized by the occupational culture of the coal mining industry in the early 1950's.

The title functions on two levels. It refers directly to the physical action of the story, the painful return of Angus, who chose not to continue in the tradition carried out by his predecessors; and it points metaphorically to the impossibility of returning to an identity bounded by a tradition that has been abandoned. The animosity Angus receives from his parents, and their reaction to his own son Alex as a stranger, create an intergenerational conflict that addresses issues of trust, obligation, expectation, and the identity crisis of a generation lost amid cultural shift. The conflict is much more overt and hard edged in this story, and the lines of division are very distinct. It is a less ambiguous treatment of the subject of tradition than in "The Boat" or "Vastness", wherein opposing beliefs within the family are more openly and hurtfully expressed.

For Angus's parents, the value that is attached to the bearing of tradition makes it nothing less than a code by which lives in the community are structured: "But it seems that we can only stay forever if we stay right here. As we have stayed to the seventh generation. Because in the end that is all there

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<sup>20</sup> First published in The Atlantic Advocate, November 1971. Textual references here are to The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.

is--just staying" (LSGB, 79). His mother's sentiments recall both "Vastness", and to a degree, "The Boat", wherein the abandonment of an occupationally based identity is inconceivable and perceived as betrayal. Conspicuously, it is again the female who somewhat righteously voices this belief. And hers is a similarly fierce and self-sacrificial stance conditioned by an identity founded upon the generational duplication of lives defined by place, ethnicity, and coal. To be aware of the weight of this tradition is not one's choice, it is one's obligation. Angus's plea of "We have to see beyond ourselves and our families. We have to live in the twentieth century" (LSGB, 79), falls on deaf ears to whom the passing of time is marked not by decades of progress and change, but by cyclical generational continuity. The mother's response, revealing disdain for the sons who departed and martyrdom for those who remained, indicates that the disruption of tradition has threatened her own identity. Not unlike her counterpart in "The Boat", hers is an identity determined by her self-definition through association with the males in her family.

His father is equally bitter and in contrast to those in the other stories, has little difficulty expressing his resentment. He embodies a very strict traditional code regarding the obligations of a first born son. The desire of Angus and his deceased brother Alex to acquire an education and a profession is presented as a concept that he simply could not grasp. He and his wife blame education for the outmigration of these two of their sons, the suicide of one of them, and the cultural loss of the other. What they feel is hurt and shame at his choice of a professional life in Montreal; however, they express this as angry vindication:

I just never figured it would be like this. It seems so far away and we get old so quickly and a man always feels a certain way about his oldest son. I guess in some ways it is a good thing that we do not all go to school. I could never see myself being owned by my woman's family. (LSGB, 77)

Both of them suggest that professional status encourages emasculation in their perception of submissive behaviour on the part of their son, and fear of the same for their estranged grandson. The suggestion that Angus has allowed himself to be "owned" by his wife is a weapon used by his father to injure him, implying that his new found professional status has robbed him of his masculinity and dignity. Angus' wife Mary is presented as somewhat over protective of Alex and outwardly critical of his grandparents in their treatment of him. This is the only MacLeod story in which distinct class lines appear within family relationships or otherwise contribute to conflict. Connotations of class differentiation that exist within these relationships are undeniable, but an analysis on the basis of class alone is superficial, failing to address the depth and complexity of a cultural fabric torn by shifting criteria for self-definition. It is somewhat problematic that the opposing positions of Mary and her mother-in-law are extreme and border on contrived. These two women are not outside the realm of believability, but as individuals they remain underdeveloped. In fact, Mary is not a developed character at all; she is diminished to the function of a device that contributes to the conflict between Angus and his parents, and the observation of this conflict by Alex.

The use of a child narrator, Alex, undermines a temptation to view this as an examination of social class conflict. An outsider in terms of age and upbringing he is still accepted by his cousins, and aware of family conflict not on the basis of class, but by virtue of childlike impressionability devoid of class consciousness. His own experiences within the community are more closely associated with masculinity than his differing social class. In a confrontation with local boys in which his cousins defend him as family, he describes himself as: "the women and children in the cowboy shows when the Indians attack" (LSGB, 80). Later when they witness the breeding of a cow, he feels that he

has seen "something that is both beautiful and terrible" that he can never share with his mother. This is not a socially imposed reaction, but an instinctive understanding, the indication being that his childhood has been sheltered from anything that Mary perceives as distasteful. Underdeveloped as a character, Mary functions as a representative of the nouveau urban class preoccupation with cleanliness and propriety, and attempts to deny the working class background out of which it grew. It is her fearful adherence to the culture of pretence and appearances that feeds her discomfort and rejection. It is her failure to rise above her own superficial stereotypes that makes her the lightning rod for their resentment and assumption that it is she who prevents Angus from coming home. This is revealed to be another incorrect presumption; Angus has exiled himself.

The scene in the showers brings these innate concepts of cultural identity and their surface disguises together to reveal Angus' identity crisis as one of self-deception. He no longer defines himself through his family's tradition, but he can no longer pretend that it is not who he is. The positioning of the grandfather and grandson, stripped of their outward definitions and observed by Angus, exceedingly conscious of his suit, encapsulates the generational skip as one disguised by social perceptions that are false.

The cultural and familial bond sensed deeply by young Alex on an innate level, remains. The grandfather's final words to the boy upon his departure, "it was ten years before you saw me, in another ten I will not be here to see" carries within it the implication that Alex has visited a past that is fast disappearing, and insight into his own identity, however far way it might seem.

*From very far away I see my grandfather turn and begin walking back up the hill. And then there is nothing but the creak and sway of the coach and the blue sea with its gulls and the green hills with the gashes of their coal embedded deeply in their sides. And we do not say anything but sit*

silent and alone. We have come from a great distance and have a long way now to go. (LSGB, 87)

The vanishing coal miner, the departing train, the deep gashes of coal seams, and the lonely silence of passengers who depart for a distant location constitute a metaphor for a dying tradition further exhausted by outmigration.

The experiential realism of these stories employs a family atmosphere in the past in contrast to the isolated and anonymous individuality of the present. The narrators' lived experience incorporates both of these opposing worlds that MacLeod depicts, and it is the pivotal position of this mid-century generation, of which MacLeod is a member, that has the potential to evoke a sense of youthful uncertainty and latent regret through the examination of exile and abandonment. The preceding generation is left behind in the past, and the succeeding one is portrayed as detached from that past, reflected in the pictures of "Red-haired grandchildren who would never know the sea in hatred or in love", sent to the father in "The Boat" (LSGB, 122). It is the outmigrants themselves who must reconcile the past and the future, and it is also their responsibility to bond these two worlds together. A triangular relationship between parents and son is common to these explorations of tradition as a double edged sword of preservation and destruction. Fathers and grandfathers who personify tradition appear troubled by a submerged frustration and stifled anger, the result of spiritual confinement, not material hardship. Mothers lack this trait, and are defined only by their surroundings and commitment to continuance. Narrators dwell between these oppositional domains, increasingly aware of their incompatibility. These manifestations of the physical world charge their private internal conflict which is ultimately one of self

preservation and self sacrifice.

The first person narrations of the professor, of James, and of Alex are only partly concerned with a realistic presentation of the past. Perhaps a discussion of the situational reality that supports these stories would be useful in approaching MacLeod's underlying objective: to uncover the subconscious co-existence of the emotional self that is contained within memory.

The prominent female characters of these stories, and the woman in "In The Fall" provide the best example of completely experience based behaviour. The most obvious similarity among the mother figures of "The Boat", "In the Fall", "The Return", and "Vastness" is the limited perspectives they exhibit. In "The Boat", "Vastness", and "The Return", they are portrayed as rigidly traditional, arguably to a fault, lacking any potential to transcend their circumstances, or conceive of a different life for their sons. The suggestion of an alternative for the narrators of each story is consistently opposed by them, conceivably a result of their own limited exposure to the outside world. It could be argued that as characters they are inadequately developed, and function only in response to the male characters in question. Their tendency to reject and control, however, is not intended to be interpreted as a destructive behaviour, rather it is a fiercely protective response to the unknown. The positioning of education as a threat to tradition initiates their spite and their resistance. If they are to be treated in the context of their own families, upbringing, and isolated experiences, a response of denial and retraction from the outside world is not necessarily negative; it is realistic. The fascinating irony of this is that they are, perhaps inadvertently, the protectors of the culture. Through their rejection of the intruding twentieth century mass culture, they promote insularity and isolation. Whether or not this is to be interpreted as a backward mentality, their actions are genuine attempts to preserve themselves and what they perceive to be the continuation of

themselves through their descendants. The position of the woman in "In the Fall", soundly in favour of the capons that will tie them to a chain of continuous marginality and dependency, represents her desire to remain on the land rather than accept the inevitable move to where her husband may be able to find work. She is defending her own domain. The mother in "The Boat" appears willing to deny her son's academic ability in order to "chain" him within a familial tradition. It is, however, her deep seated suspicion of outsiders that underlies this stance, and to her, outsiders appear only to take, not to offer. The coal mining mothers of "Vastness" and "The Return" have difficulty seeing beyond the mines in an intellectual or a spiritual capacity. Not unlike their counterpart in the fishing culture of "The Boat", they are vicariously defined by their husbands' livelihood, and they are conditioned to accept that their responsibility is utterly to their children. Efforts to ensure their sons' continuance of tradition is the only thing that will sustain them. They are, in this sense, dependent, both emotionally and materially, upon their children, and particularly upon their sons. Each story contains a triangular relationship in which the narrator, raised by his mother, faces for the first time the difficult question of knowing his father, a distant and troubled figure whose position in the household and the lives of his children is undermined by his own absence.

Each mother is synonymous with the household. However, the painful memories of MacLeod's narrators all concern fathers who hurt their sons, either inadvertently or carelessly. All of the mothers exhibit the tendency to deny emotion on their own part, and to discourage it in their sons. Their discomfort with the expression of emotion is a condition of the life of hardship and sacrifice they lead. The choice that each narrator faces is strongly associated with a male rite of passage in which he lets go of his mother to fully accept his masculinity. It is this process of distancing from the mother that leads to a



recognition of his father's subdued dissatisfaction and frustration.

James's grandmother in "Vastness" represents the only departure from the feminine traditionalist stance within this body of work. She is equally stalwart and pragmatic, but understands immediately James's desire to leave the community and the mine, revealing that she had hoped her own son would do the same. She is described as a vigorous and physically imposing woman, well preserved, and her encouragement of James is important to the understanding of all of these women. She retracts her condemnation of her husband's life spent underground: "But still, it was what he was good at and wanted to do. It was just not what I wanted him to do, or at least I did not want him to do it here" (LSGB, 38). She does not resent him for the choice that he made, but regrets it, recognizing the will that would have been necessary to reject it in the context of his own family's expectations. She also recognizes that he is capable of something else, perhaps something more, but lacks the ability to see it in himself. She sees her son the same way, repeating a pattern that she does not condone. "It seems we will be underground long enough when we are dead without seeking it out while we are still alive" (LSGB, 38). These words get at the sense of the degree to which these men and women have sentenced themselves to limitation. Their self-imposed isolation is not MacLeod's intent to portray them as martyrs, nor question why they lead lives of hardship and constant struggle, but rather an attempt to reveal the difficult and only partially successful attempts of narrators to free themselves from tradition's cyclical obligation. The women in these stories do not fail their sons, but do subject them to expectations that conform to their own limited experience. They do not fail to recognize impending change, but they do resist accepting it.

The geographic presentation of Cape Breton Island is consistent also in its repeated association with an experience and a corresponding state of mind

that is isolated and insular. The metaphoric connotations of the fisherman father's adjacent room that represents freedom to his children, James's fear of the island extending manacles with which to restrain him upon his crossing of the strait, and Alex's approach on the train to its mass rising out of the sea, all contribute to Cape Breton's status as a world of its own, apart from the larger mainland existence. Attempts to escape it exercised by the narrators parallel the labour carried out by its inhabitants who tunnel underneath it, work the sea around it, and farm its resistant soil in the search for conquest, not sustenance.

Experientially, the migrant's abandonment of location and tradition results in the emotional distress of the professor in the Midwest, James's journey and the vast uncertainty of his future, and Alex's realization of the vast difference between the life of his grandfather and what his own will be. All three migrant narrators acknowledge that their generation must accept that their lives will constitute a departure from their parents' experience. These stories are deeply concerned with the effects of outmigration, but examine this reality through the prism of the family, and the human cost of departure, its permanence, and the potential resentment and regret that are its lasting results. As individual stories they can be interpreted as segments of a singular thematic treatment of tradition's hold on communities and the dilemma of the generation compelled to seek livelihoods elsewhere. The situational realism of these stories appeals to an urban perspective in which an invasive economic and social shift eclipses a tradition, creating narrators who yearn to join a modernizing and progressing society. It is MacLeod's development of their inner struggle that undermines this simplistic analysis of the stories to reveal the emotional and psychological crisis that is generated by inevitable change, and the loss of identity that accompanies the irrevocable decisions to modernize and migrate. Family conflict is one universal aspect of the process he details.

The distance between the narrators' generation and that of their parents, and the often inadequate communication between them, create an extremely charged familial conflict between embracing change and the tendency to resist modernity at all costs. However, the inner struggle toward self-identity and reconciliation constitutes the most powerful emotional intensity within the work, and it is the voice of the exile that narrates these outbound journeys through memory in an attempt to retrieve some of what was lost.

The narrative voice that exposes these internal conflicts of conscience reflects a current socio-cultural condition in which individuals struggle to orient themselves within a mass North American culture that has emerged and within its own evolution and has lost the concept of rooted generational identity. It is in the context of this condition that MacLeod's use of memory is crucial to the development of a prolonged and incomplete search for the self. The shared narrative voice of these stories is one of loss. It speaks from the distancing of a past that is no longer available, but which continues to unfold through memory. The ability to embrace modern urban life is not conditioned by adaptation to present circumstance or by foresight, but dependent upon acknowledgement and attempted reconciliation with a past that is still present and concurrently evolving. Memory does not constitute the past, it occurs within the present and conditions the constant flux of the momentary individual experience.

In "Winter Dog", for example, or "The Boat", the response to the present is dependent on memory for resolution. The narrator's emotional response to parental treatment in the past is one of emotional paralysis, but the mind through memory is able to participate. The narrator employs memory to process present experience. The narrative employs the remembered time frame to reveal the present tense distress. Static memories presented in stories like "In the Fall", and "The Return", and the implied remembrance of "Vastness" provide

the reader with a sense of the present that conveys a continuous search for resolution. The narrative itself is motivated by an implicitly unresolved present. The narrative structure of "The Boat", "Winter Dog", or "To Everything" which enter memory after development of a present tense reality, also return to the present at the conclusion, providing the clearest examples of MacLeod's fusion of memory and experience in the presentation of a psychological time continuum. Other narratives enter immediately into the memory time frame, and the ambiguity of their unresolved conclusions. The confusion of "In the Fall", the loss of "The Return", and the uncertainty of "Vastness", are suspended, indicating each narrator's incomplete search for resolution in the present. MacLeod suggests that existence takes place within memory. The relationship between memory and experience within the present tense is his channel to the emotional self. The immediate reality of experience is dependent upon the alternate reality of memory, a fusion that encompasses both a static remembered moment and a continuum.

The use of the first person recounts individual experience and emotional responses to remembered reality. In "In the Fall", "To Everything", and "Winter Dog", these represent essentially familial experience. The narrator of each has only his own perspective with which to reveal the events and their lasting effects. "The Boat", "Vastness", and "The Return" unfold along a similar memory-based structure, but expand to accommodate a broader or more mature understanding of wider influences on the behaviour of individual family members. Nevertheless, the narrative voice shared by all of these is an extremely isolated one whose entry into the past through memory maintains a personal and intimate tone. The emotional intensity that is achieved through MacLeod's use of this formula far outreaches its structural limitations. However, the individual experience and the individual memory do have limitations as

well. The fractured identity of the present in these stories leads to the personal past on a quest for reconciliation, but there are still unresolved mysteries that remain.

Though the narrator of "The Boat" surrounds himself with plenty of comforting reality as in his walk to the all-night restaurant, he remains detached and does not participate in his surroundings, but continues to exist in a nocturnal anonymity among strangers. A solitary hitchhiker, James journeys through uncertainty in the company of an indifferent stranger whose existence consists of brief meaningless encounters with faceless people to whom he sells products. Alex leaves Cape Breton on a train car of strangers, two of whom are his parents, and although he travels toward his home, he is suddenly isolated by a burgeoning understanding of what he leaves behind. The motif of the individual in transit across the continent mirrors the solitary journey toward the self that is central to these stories. It is not only departure and movement away in the company of strangers, but the lingering indication that an identity which transcends experience is being transported as well, something that remains covert within memory. Individual experience cannot unlock this mysterious submerged awareness, but introspection may provide a doorway to a deeper generational past.

MacLeod's direct acknowledgement of the Scots-Gaelic culture is sparse but implicit in this group of stories. These narrators seem only semi-conscious of their ethnic heritage as a component of their identity, perhaps because they have yet to be exposed to anything else. The culture in general seems to be presented as more closely associated with an unreachable past. The sacrifice of Scott, a symbol of the past in "In the Fall" is a metaphor for the loss of an ethnic heritage. The presence of Gaelic song in "The Boat" is portrayed as an anachronistic curiosity. In "Vastness", James feels the urge to correct his

grandmother's evident Gaelic inflection as something antiquated and no longer useful, identifying it as a disappearing possession of older characters. And the role of traditional fiddle music in "The Return" is that of a sad lament for an irretrievable past. MacLeod includes these cultural indicators to ensure that these characters are not interpreted as being of an ambiguous background; however, their Scots identity does not overtly manifest itself as a strong influence on their behaviours or actions. It is the occupational tradition with which they are associated that determines and dominates their lives. Nevertheless, if these stories were to be examined as components of one lengthy exploration of the occupational tradition of Cape Breton, their cultural character emerges. The identity represented by the parental generation is one who possesses an overwhelming sense of fatalistic acceptance of circumstances, and who is challenged only rarely by those who are compelled to see beyond the landscape that both sustains and entraps them. The outmigrant generation has been reduced to shadows, surrounded by dark uncertainty, and struggling toward completeness. The search for identity through outbound journey and subsequent return through memory has led them to their own past and the experience of their parents.

Later MacLeod stories move beyond the individual experience and memory to delve deeply into collective memory that has preserved glimpses of the culturally preserved past. Perhaps this effort represents the author's attempt to contemplate possible underpinnings for the fierce dedication to tradition and maintenance exhibited by these people. Their susceptibility to betrayal, their attachment to the land, their insularity and suspicion of outsiders, their obsession with continuance, and their self-imposed isolation, are behaviours relative to a cultural history of fragmented migration and conditional settlement.

Stories from The Lost Salt Gift of Blood form the implicit introduction to a

particular people who are cloaked by their immediate condition. The following chapter discusses stories in which MacLeod reaches more deeply into the generational past in search of the submerged Scots-Gaelic identity of these men and women who, in their struggle to maintain themselves on Cape Breton, conceal a history scarred by the loss of their ancestral homelands.

### Chapter III

#### Children of Uncertainty

The pain of departure and loneliness of exile that permeate many of the stories in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood remain consistent themes throughout the opus of MacLeod's work. The intimate first person detail of a struggle with the past is also a lasting characteristic that remains an effective and powerful motif within later work published collectively in As Birds Bring Forth the Sun. A noticeable shift away from the naturalistic entrapment of characters who seek to be psychologically free of the consuming landscape of Cape Breton Island is first evident in the story "The Road to Rankin's Point", originally published in 1976. It represents a departure for MacLeod on this level, the role of the landscape, as well as in terms of an approach to identity that transcends individual experience and remembered past. The narrative scope of "The Road to Rankin's Point", and two later stories, "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" and "Vision", explores the collective generational past in the continuing search for the self. It is most important to acknowledge that these stories move almost entirely away from the theme of occupational tradition as a central focus and are instead very focussed on ethnic elements of Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Distinct ancestral ties and parallel landscapes in Cape Breton and the Islands of Scotland form a fundamental foundation for themes of cultural continuity and disruption. Creating a structure based on intergenerational relationships and barriers, MacLeod accesses a collective memory that may span over a century of time and include both pre and post Scottish migration locations.

The past in these three stories assumes the form of an intense and disturbing memory, manifested within a familial consciousness, that becomes



an unresolved legacy. The catalyst figure or conveyor of the past is either a grandfather or a grandfather's grandfather, from whom all of the characters are descended. This familiar yet unknowable figure is sustained by descendants' questioning of what has been passed on to them, or specifically how they may identify and understand themselves through an acknowledgement of their lineage. This ancestral character is to some degree paradoxical: he is a human figure who has transformed into one of mythological status by virtue of the circumstances of his death. The ancestral identity based on lineage is compounded by a transcendent identity that is sustained through collective memory, creating a consistent dichotomy between perceived truth and conjecture. The narrators struggle with the immense weight of the past, channelled through disjointed details that are known about these figures, and the acknowledgment of their relationship becomes a complicated process of self identification.

Death, its imminence and perplexity, is a central thematic focus of these stories. It is doubly problematic, as each narrator faces his own mortality and opens himself to the possibility suggested by the past that death repeats a pattern. The role of the tragic ancestral loss myth is strong in all three stories, particularly elements of it that may be considered anachronistic by the ideology of modern society. In each case the ancestral character leaves not only a legacy of worldly enigmatic questions, but the transmission of unworldly abilities and indicators. Narrators' efforts are sometimes focussed on incorporating the past into the present on an intellectual level, an impossibility that they eventually concede.

In establishing a past that disturbs and somewhat interferes with the present, MacLeod contradicts the idea that a visitation to the past is somehow idyllic or simplistically appealing. The idea of a return to the past as a source of

comfort is subverted by a strong sense of anxiety and fear. In all three of these stories, the knowledge of the past that is communicated is troubling, dark, and triggers feelings of tragic loss. Past events, persons, actions for which they are remembered, and deaths, are revealed as a complex web of human fallibility, a complete understanding of which is prevented by missing information, and often by concealed facts. MacLeod equates lineage, and the unknowable reaches of its influence, with an inherited knowledge that is equally unlimited in its invisible subconscious manipulations.

"The Road to Rankin's Point"<sup>21</sup> is a profoundly dark story of a young man's attempt to come to terms with physical death through a desperate search for the permanence of the spirit. As a relatively early exploration of Gaelic culture within the opus of his work, the story conveys an overwhelmingly bleak outlook which does present MacLeod at his most intensely hopeless in terms of cultural survival. Calum's meditative psychological state is consumed by his own impending death, an inevitability he attempts to address through a retreat into his own past and subsequently his ancestral past. His limited time has urged a return to the Cape Breton home of his aged grandmother on a bleak and isolated cliffside farm, a physical journey that corresponds to his spiritual pilgrimage into timelessness.

The farm's precarious position, isolation, and treacherous elevation represents a forgotten outpost where the Gaelic culture attempted to take root, but failed to endure. The rich description of this setting connotes both physical landscape and metaphoric recession of the life cycle. Images of neglect and overgrowth of previously well-maintained farm land implies not death, but

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<sup>21</sup> First published in Tamarack Review, Winter 1976. Textual references here are to The Lost Salt Gif of Blood.

regeneration and return to a natural order. Transplanted species of plants and animals no longer bear the characteristics of domestication or cultivation, but have regressed into primeval versions of themselves. The landscape is in the process of reclaiming itself from the manipulation of production. There is a sense of defiance and integrity in this transformation, which is later paralleled by the central characters.

During Calum's difficult climb to the site of the farm, various signposts indicate departure from the present into another dimension, more closely associated with, but not defined by the past. A rejection of modernity forms a strong theme throughout the story, particularly of technological progress hailed in the name of convenience, and illustrated here by the abandoned car that could not overcome the treachery of the landscape:

Now if one hangs over the perilous edge the remaining bits of automobile can still be seen strewn along the wet cliff's base...The cormorants and gulls walk carefully amidst the twisted wreckage as if hoping that each day may bring them something that they had previously missed. They peck with curiosity at the gleaming silver knobs and the selector buttons of the once expensive radio. (LSGB, 130)

The desperate clinging location of the farm also corresponds to the abstract threshold upon which Calum stands, producing an atmosphere of suspension above a region of the unknown. As a twenty-six year old dying man, his own brief past and amputated future deny him a secure position in the present, and so his expectant fear urges an entry into the distant past. A parallel to the long ago death of his grandfather at twenty-six introduces this ambiguity of time, suggesting that Calum is to fulfil some duty in his place as he enters the house "to make my presence fully known and to take my place in time" (LSGB, 136). The details of the death itself are intensely ironic: a drunken fall on the steep path in winter and a fatal wound by a shattered rum bottle;

these are delivered with intense visual clarity, some of which Calum's own imagination has created in an attempt to glean some meaning from them. The significance of his grandfather's premature death has surpassed that of his brief life as the monumental event that altered the course of the family.

During her violin rendition of MacCrimmon's Lament, his grandmother describes their musical ability and the power to foresee their own deaths as "gifts". As a minor technique the significance of the music also contributes to a strong ironic element. The pieces are forlorn and morose, their titles in translation "Never More Shall I Return" and "My Heart is Broken Since Thy Departure" revealing the composer's resigned sadness and sense of insurmountable loss. As the birthrights of their MacCrimmon ancestors, both gifts have become weak imitations of themselves: the embellished facade of the electric guitar, and Calum's reluctant acceptance of his medical diagnosis.

The nature of the music and the cryptic message of his grandfather are related techniques in MacLeod's rendering of the past's relevance to Calum's present condition. Contrary to several references to them as such, the lives of the past are not a quiet series of stifled images, but imbued with a voice, a powerful cry of futility. Written on the wall of the barn is the statement: "We are the children of our own despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree" (LSGB, 139). For Calum, the words comprise the only remaining physical evidence of grandfather, yet still defy a true understanding:

And what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen? Blown over now by Atlantic winds and scudding foam. What does it mean to all of us that he died as he did? And had he not, how would our grandmother's life have been different and the lives of her children and even mine as I have known it and still feel it as I sit here on this day? (LSGB, 140)

There is anger in this series of questions, and the indication that by the grandfather's premature death he robbed them of their rightful link to the past,

and left instead a legacy of futility. Calum's love of his grandmother deepens his association of a sense of selfish recklessness with the death, and intimations of waste, of cowardice, of betrayal, and the abandonment of them all. This resentment is crucial to MacLeod's examination of cultural identity. The message, a reference to the Clearances, suggests that dislocation will never rectify itself; the descendants of those dispossessed of their lands will never conquer another landscape. "We are the children of our own despair" implies recurring self-inflicted doubt on this account, inevitable and unchangeable. His grandfather's deprivation has reached across both geographical and generational borders to infringe upon the present. The implication is that he has indeed failed them, in that his unnecessary departure severed his children's potential to continue the culture. Her efforts to instill within them a sense of themselves was hindered by her gender, and was perhaps too large a task for one parent. The departure of three sons "into the larger world and there to fashion careers and lives that would never be theirs on this tiny sea-washed farm" (LSGB, 140), who afterwards suffer deaths of greedy urban affluence, is a comment on the cultural vacuum that grew out of their father's absence. Their fates are sharply in contrast to the death of their father and uncles who "perished in the accidental ways that grew out of their lives -- lives that were as intensely physical as the deaths that marked their end" (LSGB, 140). For Calum's own generation, the continuum has been completely severed. Having embraced the modern mass culture wholeheartedly, family members perceive her as a remnant of the past to whom they are obligated. But she has outlived her relevance, and so they await her death.

The grandmother's resilience and her awareness of the transparency of the attitudes of her adult children are strong weapons of resistance. She embodies a past of personal struggle and sacrifice, scarred by cultural

displacement and fragmentation, and the attempt by authorities to remove the 'burden' of her children from her: "Seventy years later. 'I would never have my children taken from me to be scattered about like the down of a dead thistle,' she has often said. 'I would not be that dead'" (LSGB, 150). For Calum, this is in fact what has happened, as her descendants bear little understanding or respect for their relationship to her, and while patronizing her with music and feigned celebration, they conspire to deposit her into a more convenient location. The cruel indignities that this would subject her to are all too real to Calum, for whom this situation is "ironically too distant and too close" (LSGB, 146).

Calum's concurrent proximity to and distance from his grandmother is also an interesting commentary on the generational transmission of cultural knowledge. The strong connection between Calum and his grandmother is largely an unspoken one. Generational barriers inhibit open interaction. She is a stranger to Calum, and he is reluctant to impose himself upon her. He fails to ask her the questions he seeks answers for. In a moment of intimacy, he is unable to answer the question she asks of him. They communicate little through words, but are aware that they have become each other's last hope. She has invested in him the power to save her from relegation to an institution. For him, she is the embodiment of the past he seeks refuge in. Calum has not had a vision of his own death. He has been told by an objective and expert voice that he will not live past twenty six. It is not quite the same thing:

My twenty six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little. I would go back through the superstitions and the herbal remedies and the fatalistic war cries and the haunting violins and the cancer cures of cobwebs. Back through the knowledge of being and its end as understood through second sight and spectral visions and the intuitive dog and the sea bird's cry. I would go back to the priest with the magic hands. Back to the faith healer if only I had more faith. Back to

anything rather than to die at the objective hands of mute, cold science.  
(LSGB, 153)

This expressed desire is on one level a desperate denial of death, but it is also the yearning for a kind of anti-knowledge, a return to mysterious inflictions, the replacement of certainty with faith or belief. This system of knowing is of another or earlier world, not the artificial technocratic one he has grown to despise. His urge to live manifests itself in his thirst for the past, for that past to consume him, and in the renunciation of the absolute resolutions of modern science. Her rejection of modernity, of modern belief in convenience and logic, results in his realization that neither of them truly belong to the present but dwell in another time that has been eclipsed and abandoned by their relatives. Not only do they reject the kind of existence possible in the contemporary world, they are in fact incapable of embracing it. The disclosure of his illness brings the first open emotional contact in the story. In uniting their present situations, the generational distance between them evaporates. The chronological juxtaposition of their lives has merged, and it becomes death that joins them together. Calum has indeed "taken his place in time".

The final scene is one of obscurity. It is left to the reader to decide whether it is a dream or reality: "Sometimes in the darkness of our fear it is difficult to distinguish the dream from the truth. Sometimes we wake from the dream beyond the midnight hour and it is so much better than the world to which we wake that we would will ourselves back into its soothing comfort" (LSGB, 153). If this is so, the soothing comfort is in fact the dual death that transpires, in which both Calum and his Grandmother are released from their lives. The repeated reference to darkness, and the suggestion that an internal and external darkness have converged suggest their descent into a vast

timelessness. The death or imagined death is the end of an individual life, but moreover the closure of a life cycle in which there is a strong connotation of reunification with an alternate state of consciousness. Calum's latent acknowledgement of his cultural past represents a reconciliation between the living and the dead. It is, however, with the dead that "the intensity of life" resides.

The resounding finality in the concluding image reinforces the indication that Calum's primary function is to represent the fate of the culture: "For the first time in the centuries since the Scottish emigrations, there is no human life at the end of this dark road" (LSGB, 155). The road that took him to a destination in urban Canada brought death. On the road back to Rankin's Point, his human life ceases, but he has opened the door to a conscious awareness of his origins, and this is the darkness that welcomes him home.

The anticipation of death is present, as is the ability to foresee or be forewarned of its occurrence in the conscious struggle of the narrator of "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,"<sup>22</sup> who finds himself burdened, and arguably obsessed with a knowledge that is perhaps too clear, too final, too conclusive. The powerful emotional impact of the past derives not from a voice but a powerful image, which embodies all of the fear and dread of death. Again the contemplation of a family member's approaching death invokes one from the past that gave birth to a legacy which remains a force in the lives of descendants.

Structurally, the story is more consciously deliberate than most of MacLeod's writings. It is more stylistically an oral tale, as indicated by the

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<sup>22</sup> First published in *Event*, Vol. 14/#2, 1985. Textual references here are to *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*.



opening line: "Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived by the sea" (*As Birds*, 137); the absence of dialogue, and the simplicity of the narrative's sequence of events also confirm this orientation. The introduction suggests an ambiguous tale or myth, the truthful merit of which is left in question. This is a story about contradictory knowledge, that which is universally accepted as sound reason, and that which persists on the basis of irrational belief. The former is perpetuated by learned accumulation, the latter exists within the repressed instinctual regions of the individual and is not guided by logic, but by intuition. The narrator, by virtue of his modern educated sensibility, struggles to overcome this submerged and disruptive awareness. The battle between intellectual reason and inherited familial prophecy is contained in the phrase 'you cannot *not* know what you do know' and summarizes MacLeod's treatment of the irrevocable nature of acknowledgement.

The past takes on the form of a too familiar and inescapable story, the events of which are retained and transmitted inter-generationally in highly visual and graphic detail. An ancestor five generations distant from the narrator took to the nurturing of a grey dog that was left mysteriously at his doorstep as a puppy. His special fond attachment to the dog grew as the animal did, her size eventually surpassing all of the others in his ownership, and earning her the name *cu mor glas*. Her size corresponds to the significance she bears for the man, who treats her with more than usual care and attention, soon having her bred, after which she disappears. One full year later when they are forced to land on a nearby island to shelter from a storm, she appears, welcoming him as he steps from the boat to embrace her. Her offspring, wild and frightened by his unexpected presence and embrace of their mother, attack, killing him with bloodthirsty abandon in front of his four sons. The *cu mor glas* is never seen

again except within the realm of myth, and the loss of the man is interpreted as an omen. The mysterious origins of the dog and his nurturing of her are discussed but never solved nor forgotten.

As a series of tragically ironic events from another time, the tale transcends its location in the distant past to influence and affect succeeding generations through their adoption of it as a prophecy. The dog is provided with unearthly status as something too horrific to be of this world, perhaps because of the immensity of the disbelief experienced by the witnesses to the attack. They also seek answers for the irony of the death itself, the man's tender cultivation of the thing that would destroy him. The horror of the details haunts the descendants of this man, but further torments them by the implication that the dog, both a symbol and a purveyor of death, will return for each of them in time. The Gothic elements of this belief are difficult to channel through the modern educated mind and urban sensibility, but the power of the suggestion remains a burden.

This story turns on the concept of the appeal of the rational over the unpredictability of primitive belief. This is indicated in the title which indicates primitive culture's confusion concerning the origins of the cycle of the seasons, the two images of the sun and the birds representing the arrival of Spring as a mysterious occurrence to its witnesses. The belief that the birds possessed the ability to invoke the sun was based on experience and limited understanding. So the family's attempts to comprehend the man's death are based on the little that is available to them, most of which is derived from superstitious cultural beliefs. Did the dog bring death, or did the man unknowingly bring it upon himself by preserving her life? The generational transmission of this knowledge gathers momentum, and to the narrator becomes no longer a story of the past, but an expectant apprehension of the future as he, like everyone else,

contemplates his own mortality. The *cu mor glas* is no longer a dog, no longer a spectre, but death itself:

Yet it seemed with succeeding generations that the spectre had come to stay and that it had become ours - not in the manner of an unwanted skeleton in the closet from a family's ancient past but more in the manner of something close to a genetic possibility. Many of the man's descendants moved like careful haemophiliacs, fearing that they carried unwanted possibilities deep within them. (*As Birds*, 144)

MacLeod's description of the sterility and passivity of the hospital room in which the narrator's father lies dying examines the modern ambivalence toward the instinctual resistance to death. The 'confident white clad nurses', the hushed and innocuous atmosphere, the deceptively quiet comfort of the dying man are all modern attempts to deny the base horror that accompanies death. Their father's death will be passive and expected, in direct contrast to the violent and brutal death that pervades their consciousness. The narrator admits that the knowledge that circulates within the unspoken conversation in the room, the fear and anxiety that it expresses might be "what others would dismiss as 'garbage'". Nevertheless, they are in possession of this awareness "that there are men who believe that the earth is flat and that the birds bring forth the sun" (*As Birds*, 146), and it is in possession of them. The Gaelic phrase that no one will utter is the most powerful emotional weight in the room, and it is these few words that place them "bound here in our own peculiar mortality" (*As Birds*, 146).

The issue of identity is relevant to this remark, denoting the irony of the fact that the implications of the story and the psychological presence of the *cu mor glas* bind them together, and so they are collectively consumed by the prospect of their own individual deaths. The trivial jokes of the narrator and his brothers are seen somewhat as an attempt to escape into the security of reason,

and convince each other that their fear is unjustified. The desire to dismiss the story is a metaphor for the denial of death, but it is also an attempted detachment from the past itself. On this level it is themselves which they deny or seek to free themselves from, a metaphor for the Gaelic character and cultural consciousness that is suppressed beneath their twentieth century North American exteriors.

There is a hint of satire in the treatment of this compulsive obsession, and as noted at the beginning of this discussion, the story is introduced on a note of ambiguity. It works well, however, to support the concept illustrated in the title and the notion of the phrase 'you cannot *not* know what you do know'. The inability to dismiss acquired knowledge corresponds to the futility of attempts to shed inherited identity or suppress intuitive response to irrational fears.

From a literary perspective, "Vision" <sup>23</sup> probably represents MacLeod's most ambitious work structurally, metaphorically, and in the complexity of the themes he addresses. It is an intricately textured story which employs vision as a metaphor for uncertain truth and corresponding states of blindness as alternate methods of understanding the complexities of the unseen world. The search for knowledge that traverses varying states of blindness and sight parallels the distance and mystery of the past, its cloaked truths, and bearing on the uncertainty of the future. MacLeod plays heavily on the misconception that seeing is equivalent to understanding, suggesting instead that seeing often produces confusion by presenting a contradiction to a previously accepted truth. The narrative is structured by a shifting of time frames and memory plays that encompass several centuries. The generational structure by which the story is divided or perhaps sewn together is complicated, especially with regard to the

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<sup>23</sup> Unpublished prior to collection As Birds Bring Forth the Sun in 1986.

use of first person and the true present tense. The narrator is a man of middle age, remembering himself as a boy of 17 in the year 1957, in particular on a day spent fishing with his father when a story was related regarding his great-grandparents who lived on a nearby peninsula. The recollections of his father take place somewhere in the first decade of the century when he was himself a boy of eleven. His grandparents then, provide entry into a yet previous generation, native to the peninsula, but in all likelihood either first or second generation people descended from Scots immigrants from the Isle of Canna, after which the peninsula is named. These entry points, based on generations, are not accidental but carefully contrived in order to place the reader within these settings that span the years between Scots immigration and World War Two. The narrator is of the post war generation, born during his father's overseas service.

This day in the boat spawns the story by the sighting of Canna in the distance as they wait to unload their catch. A nearby boat is commandeered by their neighbours, a rival family by the name of MacAllester, a curious spelling for this name, within which rides a school friend distanced by disagreement between the two families' fishing grounds. In these opening paragraphs the narrator recalls his friend's description of one of his ancestors who was gifted with the *Da Shealladh*, or the second sight, and his gruesome end in a barrel set alight by one jealous of his gift and the powers it provided him. The incorporation of the second sight into this outer frame narrative provides the strongest link for the shifting time frames throughout the story as a whole.

The nature of Canna is introduced in an interesting way in which its distance, one not so great by boat, is considerably greater by land and was even more so in the past when travel was more difficult. This places it in an ambiguous state in terms of the narrator, who can see it plainly, but knows of it

only as a foreign land of his ancestors and thus of the past: "My father and his brother were twins and they had been named after their grandfathers so their names were Angus and Alex. It was common for parents to name their first children after their own parents and it seemed that almost all of the men were called Angus or Alex" (*As Birds*, 157). This fact also contributes to the ambiguity MacLeod is constructing around the mysterious Canna. The notion of lineage, of repetition, and of cyclical regeneration in isolation connotes a very insular community, but also a notion of parallelism or indistinguishable lives and identities difficult to separate and recognize.

The childhood journey of his father and uncle is characterized by varying degrees of blindness, of obscured vision, and of the second sight or use of the inner eye to discern what the physical eye cannot reveal. The use of the two boys is crucial to this story, innocent yet intuitive in sensing tension and discomfort, thus using another form of sight to attempt an understanding of events. Before their departure for the distant Canna, their paternal grandmother uses tea cups to foresee their journey and is visibly disturbed by other events that are destined to take place. Upon their arrival in a storm that disorients them and creates uncertainty as to their surroundings they are transported to the home of their grandmother upon their request to a passer by. He asks several times if they are certain that she is the person they came to see, to which the reply is decisively that they are certain. Their arrival at the house of the blind woman is to them a result of the stupidity of their transporter. MacLeod's description of her establishes their repulsion by her filth, the slovenly state of her house, and the ramshackle destruction of the interior in which she is gradually tearing down her own shelter to provide warmth for herself. She is surrounded by symbols of fertility and procreation, and the boys are shocked by the unrestrained breeding of the animals who inhabit her dwelling. Their first

reaction to her domineering stature and abrupt manner is fear and uneasiness, then pity after her pathetic attempt to provide them with something to eat, by which they are further repulsed. It soon becomes not her appearance, but her very presence that disturbs them, deepened by her vague familiarity with them. Her cryptic and unsettling response to their names, "I have a long association with that name", and statement that "some are more loyal than others. . . . Remember that", further justify their feelings that she does know them, and that they should know her. And "although they realized she could not see them, they still felt that she was watching them" (*As Birds*, 165).

The flight of Angus and Alex from her house in search of their true grandmother is one of relief and a desire to forget what they have seen. They seek the comfort and attention of the grandmother they know and the grandfather they admire. Ironically, when they do arrive, wet and exhausted, the grandfather who appears to them is transformed from the distinguished and charming man they know, and he is unaware of their presence. He is drunk, unclean, and masturbating in the barn where they seek shelter and a chance to compose themselves before entering the house. They do not immediately recognize him, and when they do, their immediate response is once again fear and uncertainty. Upon entering the house moments later, he in turn does not recognize them because of his drunkenness. The reaction of his wife is to disguise his condition, and to dismiss their experience with the blind woman with a phrase one would apply to an unfortunate stranger: "poor soul." These scenes of mischance and circumstance serve to blur the line between sight and recognition, contributing to the overall ambiguity MacLeod is building. The fact that the boys do not know their grandmother, nor do they recognize their grandfather in his true state, puts into question their own identity. Indeed when they again meet the stranger who took them to the "wrong house", he

apologizes for in fact knowing who they really are.

During their stay, Angus and Alex observe the old world methods and activities of the people of Canna, and are schooled by their grandfather in the ties that exist between his Canna and the Canna of the distant past that lies across the sea. His imaginative recreation of the people and communities of Canna is in itself a vision, expressed in the manner of a personal recollection. Distance of time and distance over space are surpassed by the memory and the mind, and specifically the power of the inner eye to see and recreate. The story of *Colum Cille*, or St. Columba, a sixth century Irish mystic who lived in Scotland contains profound metaphoric connotations for the events of this story. The fact that the spiritual leader of these people was unorthodox and placed his will above conformity with church law is important to the understanding of the two pivotal characters, the grandfather or *Mac an Amharus*, and the blind woman. The power of the *Da Shealladh* exercised by the monk, his spiritual leadership, defiance of the church, his banishment, his self imposed blindness, and the phrase "back turned" in bitterness and resentment are all representative of the blind woman, her own exile and bitterness, which are, unbeknownst to the small boys, a direct result of their grandfather's betrayal. His love of *Colum Cille*, and of the people of Canna, manifests itself in his relationship with her.

Upon the boys' departure, the submerged or disguised relationship between their grandfather and this woman is partially exposed through their meeting on the way to the wharf. The ambiguity of their exchange, her question of "Who is there?", and his anonymous response, "It is myself", reveals the depth of their connection to one another. His confession that he simply "could not pass her by" indicates guilt and evidence that he is somehow indebted to her, but the details are not made available to his grandsons. A fire, visible from the boat that carries the boys home consumes the woman and her house. It is



an incident that disturbs them deeply, however semi subconsciously, as they are tormented by dreams and visions of her fiery death and that of the animals trapped with her by the rising flames. This death by fire, accidental though it may be, has powerful thematic connotations of the sacrifice of the chosen, corresponding to the earlier seer described by young MacAllester, and a later discovery, the death of the mother of *Mac An Amharius*, which he had himself foreseen.

Further facts or beliefs are contained in a story told by a young man from Canna whom the brothers meet while enlisting for World War I. He possesses much knowledge of people whom they know and yet he himself is not totally conscious of telling them something significant. He relates the mystery while they await their military assignments. It is within this young man's story that the gift of the second sight is associated with their grandfather *Mac An Amharius* and explained as something that the grandfather had difficulty dealing with. He was at times known to admit seeing things too clearly, things that he should not have been aware of. Although the man is very real and his behaviour basic and physical, the figure or identity of *Mac an Amharius* is a mythical one. The English translation of his name is revealed as "Son of Uncertainty" suggesting illegitimacy, but also putting into question his origins. And the young man from Canna goes on to suggest; "He was also thought to be handsome and to possess a 'strong nature' or 'too much nature,' which meant that he was highly sexed. 'Some say,' said the young man, 'that he sowed as much seed as the stallion and who knows who might be descended from him. If we only knew, eh?' (*As Birds*, 178). This seemingly offhand remark comes after the young man has substituted his urine for their own to be used in the medical testing, suggesting further that they are indeed the same people, from the same root, and it is not only their identities that are difficult to distinguish, but that they are

biologically the same. This statement relates to the ambiguity of lineage, the suggestion that sexual power and potency do not conform to laws or limitations imposed by moral judgment. The *Da Shealladh* also transcends the superficial and the controlled, and is part of one's nature, not one's learned behaviours.

The blind woman's power over the characters and the events taking place, and her symbolic significance is of crucial importance to what MacLeod is attempting. The feminine power of this figure transcends any other in the story, and contrasts sharply with her mortal position as a repulsive outcast of the community. The limited potential of the physical eye reveals only her worldly condition: filth, poverty, blindness, madness. These disguise her transcendent identity, available only to the inner eye, as a purveyor and protector of the purity of the culture. Her return after her death to save the descendants of her bloodlines reveals her dual nature as the giver of life and the guardian of the spirit.

It is the volatile nature of these two pivotal characters and their relationship that has caused their descendants shame and the desire to hide the past or certain elements of it. As exceptional people who do not consider themselves subject to, nor do they conform to the expectations of the community, they are considered peculiar, and eventually dangerous. The fact that their sexual relationship is evident, and her unpredictable and violent outbursts, lead the clergyman to demand their separation. Their worldly relationship is severed by the limitations of an imposed moral code. In denying her at the clergyman's request, *Mac an Amharius* denies his true love and his true self in exchange for worldly acceptance, and also rids himself of the *Da Shealladh*. His sudden abilities after becoming involved with her, and their departure after his agreement with the church, implies that in a state of separation from her, he is fundamentally incomplete. Because her back is

turned during their confrontation, what she says is unclear, but her statement that her sister will never conceive does predict their permanent childlessness. Childlessness is perceived in the community as mysterious and unnatural, the result of unworldly intervention. This action marks the beginning of her transformation, and her self inflicted blindness after giving birth to twins is the final severing of her worldly relationship with this man. She exiles herself, remaining a force in their lives through a non physical presence, unseen but omnipotent. The adoption of her surviving child by her sister and *Mac An Amharius* represents an obvious attempt to legitimize their actions and the children themselves.

These two figures represent the separate forces of the masculine and the feminine, and the shared power in their union. The qualities, or conversely, detractions attributed to *Mac an Amharius* involving the possession of "too much nature" have a cultural bearing as well as a genealogical one. Both he and she embody the potency and integrity of the culture, and the symbols of their union, insight, fire, violence, exile, bitterness, self injury, all in some way reflect the unruly nature of the Gaelic past. In one sense they represent chaotic disorder, which is cloaked by the idyllic appearance of order in Canna, and which has been further obscured by concealment on the part of their relatives. *Mac an Amharius'* denial of himself and his true mate, in exchange for the propriety of her socially acceptable but culturally vacuous sister, is a metaphor for cultural conciliation. This is of course of great significance to the narrator who in relating the story may claim himself as a direct descendant of these visionaries, affirming himself and his daughter as "the great-great granddaughter of the blind woman who died in flames and of the man called *Mac an Amharius*; and both of us, in spite of our age and comprehension, are indeed the children of uncertainty" (*As Birds*, 189).

The narrator questions the present relevance of his relationship to these figures from the past "who are all gone in the literal sense". But his own child illuminates their connection and their pulse within him. His acknowledgement of the sense of uncertainty it inspires is not presented as problematic, merely an acceptance of the questions that exist and persist without answers. It is as fundamental an element of human nature to see and not understand, as it is to question why this must be so. He concedes, at the conclusion of the story from the distant past, that his reason for remembering it may be the result of the life altering events of the day in the boat when it was recounted. Upon returning to shore on that day, they enter the legion hall where a brawl between the feuding MacAllesters and his own clan results in the partial blinding of his school chum Kenneth. This concluding irony, the blinding of the eye that the boy had used to demonstrate the *Da Shealladh*, provides sufficient unity within the outer or frame narrative to contain the inner story. As well, the concept of uncertain lineage and duplicated experience is expressed in the ambiguous fishing boundary that divides the birthrights of the families, when the narrator's blind father claims: "I can't see the boundary anyway" (*As Birds*, 188).

The final symbol of the rope is one of strong ties, intertwining, and of continuity. The attempt to define its properties is unsuccessful:

And when the wet ropes of the lobster traps came out of the sea, we would pick out a single strand and then try to identify it some few feet further on. It was difficult to do because of the twisting and turning of the different strands with the rope. Difficult to be ever certain in our judgments or to fully see or understand. Difficult then to see and understand the twisted strands within the rope. And forever difficult to see and understand the tangled twisted strands of love. (*As Birds*, 189)

The presence of a narrator who struggles with incomplete knowledge of a cultural and genealogical past constitutes a strong shared characteristic among these stories. The journey upon which each narrator embarks is one

that leads beyond their own lived experience and remembered past toward a previous collective existence that is traced through shared identification with individuals who are presented as forceful influences on the lives of the present. The narrative search for the self has not been disrupted, but moved into different territory in which landscape has shifted from the physical realm of experience to the internal realm of the imagination. The convergence of past and present within memory explored by MacLeod is not limited by historical or factual constraints, but as a fictional journey across time, it reveals a highly textured and complex construction of the transcendent Gaelic identity as a migratory life force.

Unlike their insular and restricting presence in earlier work, Cape Breton locations are presented as pivotal ones, conspicuously subject to a previous setting in the distant past, and themselves later made victim to a depletion of people to the inner regions of Canada. As a destination, central Canada is synonymous with a modern urban state of mind, one that has been cleansed of its immigrant past. The presentation of Cape Breton as transient stopover for the Gaelic identity is an interesting interpretation in itself. The continuous process of migration, or exile over time, is the transcendent journey of this identity, which transports and transmits its past intergenerationally. Within MacLeod's continuing exploration of this concept, an interesting contrast lies in the detailed landscape of "The Road to Rankin's Point", for instance, and the ambiguity of the later work "Vision", wherein the distinction between the Isle of Canna and its Cape Breton offspring peninsula has receded from the physical landscape, into the obscure region of collective memory. The overt parallels between Calum and his grandfather: the exact location of death, its prematurity, and the presence of blood, are elements of unity that establish a duplicated experience of cultural alienation. The Point itself binds their mutually

exclusive lifespans to a landscape, simultaneously representing their division. Calum's questioning of the significance of "Islands long left and never seen" may as easily apply to Rankin's Point, devoid of human life or the evidence of it, a newly blank and uncharted wilderness. Its importance for Gaels on both sides of the migration as a physical manifestation of the culture dies along with Calum, and we mourn this passing more than his death. The parallel Cannas of "Vision" are detached from the landscape and ambiguously indistinguishable. Equally foreign and distant to the narrator, and occupying an ethereal location that is more representative than real, they suggest continuance rather than fracture and abrupt cessation. The transition of the role of landscape in "Road to Rankin's Point" to that of "Vision" is further supported by the ambiguity of the opening sentence of "As Birds": "There once was a family with a Highland name who lived by the sea" (*As Birds*, 137), which may refer to either a Cape Breton or Highland Scotland location, or both. Here we find the first of many divergent but not unrelated paths that this fiction is undertaking in its exploration of Gaelic Identity. The geographic significance of Cape Breton is receding as its symbolic cultural meaning and value increases. As a place, the migration of its population results in a loss of its historical and factual significance as a location relevant to the Highland Scots influx. In terms of cultural value, its significance is becoming increasingly dependent upon the powers of memory to record and retain. MacLeod is no longer employing specific landscapes as a deterministic factor in lived experience, but rather as a series of symbolic locations which connect individual lives across an expanse of time.

Not surprisingly, the tone and atmosphere differ considerably in these stories which reveal common cultural themes that are expressed from different vantage points, and move toward quite opposing conclusions. The culture's amputated future in "The Road to Rankin's Point" is rejected by the more

optimistic musings of the narrator of "Vision", who in remembering those who are "all gone in the literal sense", maintains the continuum that may be traced through the two Cannas back to the ancient Gaelic world, and he may pass this heritage to his own offspring. Compared to "The Road to Rankin's Point", there is less lament for the past in "Vision", less fractured severance of life, and less bitterness toward a history characterized by migration and conditional settlement. Like "Vision", "As Birds" testifies to the internalized maintenance of the past as instances of lived experience, accessed through the limited resource of memory, and sustained by the restorative power of the imagination. In this sense the journey moves not only between past and present, but takes a significant turn away from knowledge, or the factual, into the realm of belief. Calum's rejection of modern science, the "Vision" narrator's identification with and preservation of his distant but vital ancestry, and the "As Birds" narrator's failed attempt to dismiss the past on the basis of logic, are all consistent with a newly discovered faith in the unknowable.

In terms of identity, a complex departure has taken place within these fictive journeys to the distant past. The historical and geographic Scots migration across water parallels the fictive journey across time from the Islands of Scotland to Cape Breton to the modern Canadian identity in the continuation of the narrative search for the self. The fixed, or place related Cape Breton identity has been supplemented by the dimension of time, revealing a submerged cultural consciousness which is both dynamic and constant, traced through the continuous migration of lives across generations. MacLeod's narrators not only acknowledge and absorb information, but discover their own physical embodiment of the pasts they encounter. Calum and his grandfather both bleed, suffering physically from their acute awareness of cultural displacement and isolation. The rationalistic narrator of "As Birds" is as

powerfully drawn to the psychological cultivation of the *cu mor glas* as his predecessors, and as intensely as his ancestor was to its physical fortitude. The narrator of "Vision" consistently uses his own insight, or second sight, to unravel and expose the complex truths of the distant past.

Genetic inheritance, particularly references to blood as a conveyor of cultural property, constitutes a central vehicle for MacLeod's inquiry into identity. His use of lineage is a technique hesitantly discussed by critics. Perhaps they fear its potential association with notions of supremacy or ethnic superiority. The classical symbolic properties of blood as the source of life are present. However, it is the capacity of bloodlines to form a physiological bridge between lives separated by expanses of time and the insurmountable barrier of death that constitutes a powerful motif. The blood relationship provides justification for the emotional and psychological kinship that persists without rational explanation. MacLeod's treatment of blood as a constant is in essence the relationship of the body and the mind.

The realm of the physical, therefore, has a direct bearing on MacLeod's discussion of the past. Lives and deaths ultimately determined by the abilities and the limitations of the physical body represent a reality eclipsed by a modern lifestyle that is devoid of struggle. The receding necessity of a strong body corresponds to an increasing distance between the mind and the body, and thus a weakened understanding of the physical body and the natural world. In their intensely physical lives, the "highly sexed" *Mac an Amharius* and his cherished stallion, the owner of the *cu mor glas* and his breeding of animals, and Calum's great uncles who succumbed to the elements they subjected themselves to for survival, all support the indication that modern lives are no longer ruled and defined by the body, but by the mind.

MacLeod's treatment of the Highland migrations is but one example of



dormant and unprocessed knowledge lodged in the cultural psyche, which to an outsider is at best an item of curiosity from the distant past. In the "The Road to Rankin's Point", MacLeod does not go about the task of recreating or portraying the diaspora of Scottish emigrations and Clearances and the settlement of Cape Breton. Instead, he focuses on the internalized after-effects, evidence of which his characters of the present may sense but do not recognize. It is not the experience of emigration that is conveyed but the lasting pain that resulted from it, transmitted through the familial retention of cultural despair. Damage to the Scots-Gaelic psyche caused by displacement overseas and represented by the grandfather, constitutes the disruption of a continuum, but is a relatively recent historical event within the record of the Gaelic peoples. MacLeod's long reach in "As Birds" and "Vision" into the ancient past places the Gaels of Cape Breton on that continuum, the threads of which must be traced through an underlying consciousness obscured and fractured by disassociation. The barriers of geographic, political, national, religious, and societal shift have not severed, but disguised the submerged ethnic character within the modern Canadian identities of his narrators.

The psychological and physical bond that is uncovered by these examinations of incomplete knowledge also communicates on a deeply humanistic level. Each narrator identifies with his ancestral counterpart on the basis of emotional crisis: the angst of the young father of Rankin's Point, the horror of the witnesses to the *cu mor glas*, the intense bitterness of the spurned blind woman of "Vision". Modern uncertainty, anonymity, and fear have their counterparts in the past. Their connection lies in the acknowledgement of human fragility and human struggle as elements of existence that transcend time. These victims of human tragedy respond to their misfortunes in ways determined by their cultural beliefs, and it is through their human strengths and

weakness that their cultural selves are revealed. The psychological force of the MacCrimmons, the inseparable Angus and Alexes, the final cry of the phrase *cu mor glas*, are the mental manifestations of the constancy of the blood. The meeting place of the mind and the body is within the heart, and it is there that the true feeling of oneness among these people resides. The profound emotional impact of these stories is the love relationship that transcends the physical lifespan, remains concealed to the intellect, and is confined only by the permanence of the human spirit. A memory is all of these things. As MacLeod's channel to the past, memory reveals a cultural continuum, cloaked by the superficial knowledge of names and locations since vanished, and preserved and sustained by love.

These three stories constitute a departure from the the record of individual remembered past into the vast expanse of collective memory in the continuing search for evidence of the self. In addition, there is a conscious shift away from the locational physical evidence of the Gaels of Cape Breton toward an examination of the emotional intensity of their pervasive presence in the lives of their descendants. This shift in focus is, in one sense, a move from the external realm of experience into the internal regions of the imagination. The discussion in the following chapter introduces stories in which a new and considerably more conceptual approach to the present state of the Cape Breton Gaelic culture is apparent. Central characters are employed to a lesser degree as obscure figures of the past, but more effectively as symbols of the culture itself. It will be argued that this is in effect the third stage of MacLeod's evolutionary fictive search for the Gaelic mind and character, in which character and landscape are unified, and the merging of the external evidence of culture and the internal consciousness is complete.

## Chapter IV

### A Series of Isolations

Alistair MacLeod's sincere and direct interest in the Gaelic world of Western Cape Breton seems to manifest itself predominantly in the 1986 collection As Birds Bring Forth the Sun. This focus is particularly well illustrated by the stories "The Closing Down of Summer", "The Tuning of Perfection", and by the later story "Island", first published separately, and later collected in New and Selected Stories.

"The Closing Down of Summer" is a complex psychological narrative contained within the internal monologue of a coal miner. It employs the first person present tense form with which MacLeod is most effective and evocative. "The Tuning of Perfection" and "Island" are closely related in their treatments of the theme of isolation and survival, however, they differ considerably from other MacLeod stories in terms of structure and organization. The main reason for this is their adoption of the third person form. It is interesting to examine MacLeod's use of this form, one that is quite possibly more challenging for him. The decision to use it creates narratives wherein the focus shifts considerably away from the kind of intimate testimonial of a story like "Closing Down" to a broader and more externalized approach to characters. In other words, characters are not revealed through their own voices, but developed through an objective third person narrator who constructs characters within an environment as opposed to earlier work which constructs an environment through one character-narrator. It is also interesting to note that these two stories are told exclusively in the past tense, a technique that provides even more distance between the narrative voice and the fictional setting. A writer like MacLeod is not unaware of the dangers of this shift in narrative form and indeed he does

sacrifice some of the emotional intensity and intimacy of earlier work. However, it seems that this decision was not merely experimentation but rather the conscious choice to employ a form which would provide much needed objectivity in attempting to convey a sense of collective cultural consciousness through the vehicle of one representative character. As carefully constructed and generally more obvious stories, the objectives of "The Tuning of Perfection" and "Island" depart significantly from the realistic elements of earlier work into the more conceptual exploration of cultural crisis through the representative protagonists Archibald and Agnes.

All three of these stories constitute an attempt to deal with the issue of cultural shift in localities that are influenced toward change by both external pressures and internal attitudes.

Although the issue of ancestry is present, these stories work to reflect the current state of the culture through one representative individual. They are somewhat concerned with relationships, but focus more intently on individuals in isolation, and there is a strong sense of solitude and introspection that characterizes the narrative voice of "Closing Down", and the protagonists of "Tuning of Perfection", and "Island". Interestingly, these three stories contain marriages that have failed or been severed by death in which the surviving member contemplates isolation and loss. The functional role of each of these individuals as a parent is considered in the context of the family, but they also bear responsibility for the health and security of the culture itself, a theme that is present in both "Vision", and "The Road to Rankin's Point".

In particular, MacLeod addresses the issues of the Gaelic language and traditional music as sources of strength and identity, and he incorporates consideration of the future of these communities in his work. As well as focussing on his characters' cultural strength, and the challenges that they face,

he examines the need for those inside the culture to gain self-awareness and insight into the nature of their own cultural possessions. In this way, he creates a strong conflict both externally between characters, and subconsciously within central characters. There is an inconspicuous focus on the manifestations of culture as a way of life or a particular ancestral history here, although these elements are present implicitly. MacLeod no longer approaches the Gaelic culture entirely as an experience, but rather, as a state of mind. Most effectively, the landscape represents a state of mind for the miner called MacKinnon, whose underground existence mirrors the cultural burial from which he suffers. For Archibald, his isolated mountain habitat exhibits the culturally exclusive beliefs he espouses, and his own dilemma as an endangered species. Agnes MacPhedran not only shares her name and existence with the island on which she lives, but in essence, she becomes synonymous with it. These three are inseparable from the landscape they inhabit, and they are profoundly aware of the conditional and temporary nature of their connection to it, and thus of life itself. In this context, the situational reality is a metaphor for cultural existence. All three stories create a parallel between geographic location and internal psychological landscape.

These protagonists are extremely misunderstood by the younger generation that surrounds them, a result of both the communication breakdown within the culture, and their self-imposed retreat from modernity. In this sense, they do represent the past. The relationships of crucial importance to them are located in the past, as is their own self-identity. And in their contemplation of their own future, a metaphor for the position of the culture, they do look to the past for direction.

MacLeod's story "The Closing Down of Summer"<sup>24</sup> is probably one of his most difficult and complex works, straying from the structural formula of memory to a sustained first person testimonial narrative. Perhaps best described as a sustained internal monologue, the story is poignantly meditative and reflective, intensely personal, and reveals a state of regret that borders on the confessional.

The story may be interpreted in some ways as the continuation of the story of the migrant labourers of "The Vastness of the Dark", after a temporary solution to labour surplus has evolved into a permanent way of life. The narrator, a career miner who could have been one of those on their way to Blind River in 1960, resurfaces in the late 1970's to a world that has been transformed. The dark cyclical entrapment of the Cape Breton coal town that James abandoned is gone and has been replaced by a post-modern transient world of anonymity and intangibility. The narrator is a member of the MacKinnon Crew, a group of development miners employed by a faceless Toronto corporation, who are summoned to distant locations to develop sites. Detached from any permanence, the underground existence they lead has created a world of complete insularity and isolation, in which they labour underneath a range of foreign landscapes devoid of inhabitants. The underground exists apart from surface reality and is not subject to the passage of time:

We have moved about the world, liberating resources, largely untouched by political uncertainties and upheavals, seldom harmed by midnight plots, the surprising coups and the fast assassinations. We were in Haiti with Duvalier in 1960, and in Chile before Allende and in the Congo before it became associated with Zaire. In Bolivia and Guatemala and in Mexico and in a Jamaica that the tourists never see. (*As Birds*, 30)

In an ironic evolution from the dark downward tunnelling of the Cape

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<sup>24</sup> First published in *The Fiddiehead*, Fall 1976. Textual references here are to the collection *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*.

Breton coal town, capitalism has reversed the psychological entrapment of the mine and replaced it with the alienation of transience. The narrator and his crew suffer from post-modern conditions of labour, isolated by specialized technology and deprived of human contact with the surrounding world. They have become nomadic, completely detached from any particular geographic location, including Cape Breton where they now lie on the beach awaiting their next assignment.

Mackinnon's account of a life spent as a migrant miner echoes the voices of "Vastness" on two levels, that of the physical mutilation of underground labour, as well as the psychological obsession with enclosure and limitation. He is aging and his body exhibits the strength and the scars of his brutal occupation, a physical and psychological condition he shares with the rest of his crew that testifies to a constant proximity to death, and to their comrades who succumbed to its perils. And his memory retains the compelling urge similar to the father and grandfather in "Vastness", that continuously sought out underground labour in the search for conquest over coal and the creation of space where none existed:

In the chill and the damp we have sentenced ourselves to the breaking down of walls and barriers. We have sentenced ourselves to enclosures so that we might taste the giddy joy of breaking through. Always hopeful of breaking through though we know we will never break free. (*As Birds*, 30)

However, distant and otherwise unrelated towns like Elliot Lake, Bancroft, Springdale, and Kirkland Lake, are no longer synonymous with labour but with violent death.

The central portion of the story is as much a meditation on the burying of the dead as it is on death itself. The brutal and gory nature of accidents, the conditions of the mine, and the mutilation of bodies lay the foundation for a

fatalistic acceptance of the inevitable. The narrator is "a witness and a survivor" of these events, but concedes that the full horror of the truth is never conveyed through official statements to authorities and company officials. And the death itself is dwarfed by the task of informing relatives of the reality: "The darkness of the midnight phone call seems somehow to fade with the passing of time, or to change and be recreated like the ballads and folktales of the distant lonely past" (*As Birds*, 19). There is a compelling urge to cling to the death, its details, the same way one would cling to that life, its individual experience and character; and this reference to the oral maintenance of the very conversation is a most powerful insight into the culture of the Gaelic mining community which both accepts and mythologizes its own deaths through its cultural traditions of folktales and ballads that memorialize and maintain its past. The written record on the other hand is cruelly final and succinct, an impersonal statistic that is delivered anonymously, then tucked away and forgotten. "But the yellow telegram is more blunt and more permanent in the starkness of its message and it is never, ever thrown away" (*As Birds*, 19).

In the most intensely disturbing passage of the story MacKinnon disturbs his father's grave while preparing one for his brother, both mine explosion victims in divergent locations. The timbers brought to brace the old coffin during the burial of the new conform to a familiar ritual "and the ground they held so temporarily back seemed but an extension of those that had caused his life to cease" (*As Birds*, 21). This suggestion forms a recurring motif in which the grave becomes a mere continuation of the activity and labour that has consumed their collective existence, and each death resonates with the inevitability of his own.

As a metaphor, the underground works in several capacities: as the resting place of the dead that houses the living, as a psychological enclosure



that may provide the satisfaction of conquest, and most effectively as a metaphoric location of the Gaelic language, which having "gone underground", is a cultural practice associated with the dead or dying, and contributes to a state of mind that is submerged and has lost the ability to communicate. The isolated peril of the underground requires an unfailing network of communication amongst the crew in which individual safety cannot be distinguished from the safety of the group. Thus the strength of communication that has evolved among them has become synonymous with survival:

As a youth and a young man I did not even realize that I could speak Gaelic and entertained a rather casual disdain for those who did. It was not until the isolation of the shafts began that it began to bubble up somehow within me, causing an unexpected surprise at finding it there at all. As if it had sunk in unconsciously through some strange osmotic process while I had been unwittingly growing up. Growing up without fully realizing the language of the conversations that swirled around me. Now in the shafts and on the beach we speak it almost constantly though it is no longer spoken in our homes. (*As Birds*, 24)

The concept of a spoken language that no one hears is a powerful one, and is contrasted with its diminished function above ground. The mine itself, in alienating them from the transpiring surface reality, has preserved them in a cultural past, and in this context, the underground works most effectively as a metaphoric location of the Gaelic language. MacLeod makes the statement that survival of the group is dependent upon communication, upon language, and survival of the individual is dependent upon the survival of that group. The narrator reveals the subconscious level where the language lay dormant, and its emergence in a dark subterranean location further emphasizes the parallel of the underground and a buried cultural existence. The theme of premature burial is in fact the transposition of the Cape Breton miner from reality to the realm of the symbolic. The reemergence of these exiles reveals their transformation to anachronistic figures who have lost their role within the

community. The underground existence in which they dwell is a kind of limbo between the past and the present, where they carry out an occupational tradition that has been eclipsed by post-modernity, and continue living a Gaelic culture that has been replaced by a mythologized symbol:

Once, it is true, we went up to sing our Gaelic songs at the various Celtic concerts which have become so much a part of the summer culture and we were billed by the bright young schoolteachers who run such things as MacKinnon's Miners' Chorus; but that too seemed as lonely and irrelevant as it was meaningless. . . . It was as if it were everything that song should not be, contrived and artificial and non-spontaneous and lacking in communication. (*As Birds*, 24)

MacLeod's reference to the "summer culture" addresses the exploitation associated with increasing tourism in the region. Moreover it indicates that upon emerging from exile underground, the living culture has been eclipsed by a weak commercialized version of itself. Underground, the language and the music sustain life. Above the surface, the crew emits forgotten and empty syllables that have been reduced to a source of entertainment for outsiders who yearn for relics of the past. In this sense, the listeners are deaf to the language, deaf to the music, and deaf to the culture that both represent.

I would have liked to reach beyond the tape recorders and the faces of the uninvolved to something that might prove to be more substantial and enduring. Yet in the end it seemed we too were only singing to ourselves. Singing songs in an archaic language as we too became more archaic and recognizing the nods of acknowledgement and shouted responses as coming only from our friends and relatives. (*As Birds*, 25)

MacKinnon's regret addresses the crucial distinction between living a culture and perceiving it through exhibition. A lapse in communication separates the lived experience from the impressions of those who witness it. Employing the underground as a metaphor for cultural survival, MacLeod encapsulates the dilemma of the Gaelic culture which having "gone

underground", has become a culture of exhibition, its isolated survivors no longer capable of communication amongst themselves, only display for outsiders.

Mackinnon's latent self discovery that Gaelic music and language sustain him is a privately held one that remains unexpressed, a metaphor for the lapsed transmission of cultural knowledge and tradition generationally. His nomadic existence has permanently severed his once loving marriage to a woman with whom he shares seven children. He laments this loss, simultaneously accepting it as a necessary condition of the occupation, revealing that his wife was "from a mining family and grew up largely on funds sent home by an absentee father. Perhaps we are but becoming our previous generation" (*As Birds*, 23). Like the treatment of death, this concession to tradition is mentioned with sadness and a reluctant acceptance of the inevitable. He acknowledges the distance between himself and his own children, both personally and generationally, and the vastly different life his sons and daughters will lead. And in this he touches on the shift from the geographic migration of his own generation to the demographic pattern in which his own children will take part:

Our sons will go to the universities to study dentistry or law and to become fatly affluent before they are thirty. . . They will join expensive private clubs for the pleasures of perspiration and they will not die in falling stone or chilling water or thousands of miles from those they love. They will not die in any such manner, partially at least because we have told them not to and have encouraged them to seek out other ways of life which lead, we hope to gentler deaths. And yet because it seems they will follow our advice instead of our lives, we will experience in any future that is ours only an increased sense of anguished bereavement. Perhaps it is always so for parents who give the young advice and find that it is followed. (*As Birds*, 27)

Mackinnon's meditation on his own impending death represents the

cultural death that will take place with the demise of his generation. "For all of us know we will not last much longer and that it is unlikely we will be replaced in the shaft's bottom by members of our flesh and bone. For such replacement, like our Gaelic, seems to be of the past and now largely over" (*As Birds*, 27).

The departure of the crew is surrounded by a sudden and inevitable change in the weather as they close down their summer and prepare to move on into unknown underground territory. The horizon is bleak:

Out on the ocean now it is beginning to roughen and the southwest wind is blowing the smallish waves into larger versions of themselves. They are beginning to break upon the beach with curling whitecaps at their crests and the water that they consist of seems no longer blue but rather a dull and sombre grey. (*As Birds*, 32)

The waves that are developing, a symbol of their own offspring, obliterate their traces from the shore and "The sea has washed its sand slate clean" (*As Birds*, 33). This consideration of the culture's future is despondent and hopeless in regard to its silenced and obliterated past. The loss in numbers of its people is further damaged by the inability of survivors to communicate and share amongst themselves the integral value of experience and identity. The season that approaches is one of uncertainty and darkness that will be spent in isolation far from the living but in an ambiguous world previously referred to as the "land of the dead" (*As Birds*, 23). The intimation that these men are already dead represents the end of a cycle in the life of the Gaelic culture, their lives and deaths underground obscured as vague myths of the past, and the future generation lost to their understanding or influence.

The sentiments in this story also closely resemble those of "The Road to Rankin's Point" in which a past that lies out of reach and is failed by communication invites an amputated and fractured future for succeeding generations. The parallel use of physical and cultural death is the most

powerful thematic motif in both stories. "The Closing Down of Summer" expresses a pessimistic view of the continuance of the Gaelic culture in Cape Breton, a belief that was widespread during the 1970's and since then, has been considered somewhat premature. It is interesting that this fictional exploration of the relationship between the Gaelic identity and the coal mining tradition affirms the presence of the culture while simultaneously pronouncing its death.

Archibald, the protagonist of "The Tuning of Perfection,"<sup>25</sup> is both the literal and the figurative representative of the Gaelic past. An aging woodsman dwelling alone atop a mountain in Cape Breton, Archibald embodies the solitary existence of the culture in rural and static isolation, and the generational link to its foundation in the past. Themes of intergenerational communication also support this story through examination of cultural practice that is inherent within the occupational character of the area and its rich tradition in Gaelic song. The story is written in third person, a departure for MacLeod that indicates an attempt to distance himself from his subject, perhaps to gain a wider perspective on the cultural themes he develops. As a character study, the story works to illustrate both a continuum and shift in which the older and younger generations must strive to cooperate in the preservation of cultural tradition.

Not unlike the narrator of "Closing Down", Archibald has been moulded from his environment in the pristine mountainous woodlands where he has lived his entire life. He is synonymous with the landscape that he inhabits: pristine, rugged, and vastly indifferent to the surrounding outside world. The elements of nature both sustain and educate him. His solitude as a cultural

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<sup>25</sup> First published in The Cape Breton Collection, Pottersfield Press, 1984. Textual references here are to the collection As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.

survivor is deepened because he is a widower, a lonely position that recurs in MacLeod's work. The experience of growing old without the love of his cherished wife, and being subsequently denied the joy of his children, has changed him. More importantly, it has altered the way he is perceived by his own kin. The removal of his daughters down the mountain is clearly unfair, and their alienation from him most unnatural: "And then they began to call him 'Archibald' as did the other members of the households in which they lived. So that in the end he seemed neither husband nor brother nor even father but only 'Archibald'" (*As Birds*, 108). This transformation, coupled with his already removed stance toward his kin, allows him to be dismissed as a peculiar recluse, untouchable and distant.

MacLeod's incorporation of the eagles as a symbol of beauty, strength, and instinctual knowledge of a natural habitat is an obvious parallel for Archibald's self-imposed isolation and independent survival. The increasing struggle of the birds to maintain their way of life an equally clear symbol of the encroachment of mass society upon the woodlands. Archibald himself is a kind of endangered species, however, like most of these, he is not sufficiently understood by those who wish to exploit him.

Labelled "the last of the old-time Gaelic singers" by the academic folklore community, Archibald is not only hesitant but mystified by outsiders' renewed interest in Gaelic song tradition, the techniques and melodies of which are passed generationally. The theme of music is treated by MacLeod both as a source of power and inner strength and as cultural expression. For Archibald, the singing of traditional songs is a spiritual activity and a personal one, but seemingly in this approach to the experience he is alone. Outsiders studying the survival of the language and melodies perceive it as an oddity, and apply academic judgment and analysis to something that is to him a natural element

of himself. His standards regarding music are strict, adhering to a code of exact and accurate enunciation and rhythm. His relationship to the language itself underlies his respect for the purpose and inspiration underlying the composition of the songs, and their corresponding presentation. The destruction of the natural relationship between Archibald and his children has prevented this cultural transmission and in this sense, their distancing is both familial and cultural. Their poor understanding of the difference between cultural integrity and exploitation creates a conflict surrounding a singing competition.

MacLeod explores a generational gap in understanding the cultural significance of Gaelic traditional songs as not limited to the words or the music, but indebted to their meaning to those who first sang them, and the emotional weight they still bear for those who inherit them. For Archibald, his children bear no similarities to himself or his wife, and share none of their values; rather, their conduct represents a stark contrast to his own, resultant from the span of years and cultural removal from the root of their bloodlines. The introduction of Sal, his granddaughter, illustrates both the familial and cultural distance he feels from his community. For Sal, Archibald symbolizes the past, and for him she symbolizes a crude and ignorant culture that has retained nothing of the attributes he associates with himself or his wife. Their conversation about singing is wrought with communication gaps and opposing beliefs about the language and the music. Her response to his question about understanding the meaning of what she sings is one of callous indignance: "No. . .neither will anybody else. I just make the noises. I've been hearing the things since I was two. I know how they go. I'm not dumb y'know" (*As Birds*, 113). If the meaning has been lost to those who sing the songs, any significance for those who hear them is impossible, and Archibald's total isolation is further embedded in the concept of a language that has lost its capacity for communication. Moreover,

her attraction to Archibald's knowledge and practice is based on its potential for exploitation by outsiders, and in this way, his own community is mining him as a resource.

Parallel to this cultural generation gap is Archibald's approach to the logging of the area which he carries out with balance and moderation, respecting the forest as a living entity able to replete itself if not abused. His exchange with Carver, a rough young lumberman, reveals similar gaps in understanding and value systems as those illustrated by his distance from Sal. Carver's admiration for Archibald's land and his remarks about the difference in the quality and abundance of the forest from commercial land that has been clear cut reveals his innate understanding of the damage done, and at the same time, his willingness to accept it. His admiration and his offer to purchase are therefore contradictory because he desires the land for its commercial value, not its beauty. Carver's engineering of the sale of Archibald's mare to a stranger further emphasizes the gap that exists between the two men's belief systems. The buyer's questions are to Archibald puzzling and have little to do with the natural abilities and qualities of the animal. The inflated price he is paid also confuses him. His horror at learning the unnatural services for which she has been purchased borders on total disbelief, and is a further critique on MacLeod's part of the difference between the waning harvest and increasing abuse of resources.

The events surrounding the singing competition bring together many of the themes and parallels that MacLeod is working with regarding the relationship between cultural and environmental respect. The obvious indifference of the television producers toward the cultural importance of the music is deepened by their superficial approach to the presentation of an image rather than a reality. Their preoccupation with appearances, with tailored and



abridged versions, and with altering the mood and effect of the music all contribute to Archibald's reluctance to co-operate, against the wishes of his family whose priorities are equally inverted. Much to his disgust, their willingness to compromise the integrity of their own traditions is based on a desire to shop and visit acquaintances in the city. The packaging and sale of culture to a television audience means little to either the outsiders bent on exploitation, or the insiders anxious to allow it's distortion for a meagre profit. To him, there is little difference between the sacrifice of the music he cherishes, and the destruction of a graceful mare for the profits of an anonymous pharmaceutical company, or the obliteration of a natural habitat due to inefficient and greedy logging practices.

The rigidity and resistance within Archibald's character is presented as a positive defensive tactic in the preservation of cultural tradition, but his solitude and isolation are equally strong parts of his character and primarily negative forces with regard to the culture's internal ability to adapt to modern survival. Not unlike the narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer", Archibald is a kind of dying breed. He does not display the same compliance with an encroaching modernity, but recognizes the need to accommodate and compromise his sense of perfection in order to contribute to the continuance of the music for the future. His final recognition of Carver's willingness to learn is the realization of his position as a tradition bearer and his responsibility to share his knowledge. The employment of Archibald to represent the culture provides an insight into a pragmatic and judgmental side of the Gaelic character, one that is proud to a fault, and who will risk self destruction in defence of the moral high ground. In essence, Archibald himself, his actions, and his thoughts about his distant MacKenzie cousin are a reconciliation and an acknowledgement of internal conflicts that are superficially and unnecessarily conceded too much power.

This is, however, a story of harsh confrontation and unbending rationale.

This localized confrontation well illustrates the wider universal conflict between the older society whose values are derived from an attachment and a livelihood on the land, and the overwhelming reaches of the modern market society which has the power to leave no stone unturned in its thirst for resources of a material and a cultural nature. The inevitable bankruptcy of this modern state can only lead to a preservative and defensive stance on the part of those who retain something of their own traditional culture and resources. The divisions that MacLeod has developed in the story are not necessarily moralistic in nature, although Archibald himself does display these tendencies. Archibald is a difficult and complex character, and perhaps a closer look at his inherited attachment to the land and occupational tradition is the most constructive means of uncovering what MacLeod is attempting to portray. The introduction of Archibald is conditioned by his association with "the man from Skye", his ancestor and the original land grantee. The discussion of roads and those deemed "public" and "private" may appear as an introduction to the locale in which the story takes place. But MacLeod gets at an important element of culture often overlooked: the crucial importance of geography and landscape in the cultivation of a cultural state of mind. He hints at the possible reasons for the man from Skye to build in such an unreachable location and therefore Archibald's own reasoning in "going up the mountain when everyone else was coming down". During the time of the man from Skye the road was communication and the only method of interaction with others. That situation was eclipsed by the modern market society through telecommunications and corporate interest. In a matter of three generations, the mountain's natural defences, and correspondingly the culture's, were transcended and rendered obsolete. Those who went down the mountain were influenced first, their

values, their outlook, and their ability to sustain themselves gradually conforming and disintegrating into open interaction and dependency on the outside world. The reference to "more service for the tax dollar" is an obvious comment on this state of mind, coupled with the reluctance of government to adhere to its responsibility. The man from Skye wanted no part of the North American mass culture, and he had a method of defence. In his attempt to employ the same, Archibald is betrayed by his own people, his own children in a sense, who have grown to identify themselves through the mass culture and any exploitative use it may have for their remaining traditions.

MacLeod is careful not to make this a simplistic sanctification of the past and righteous condemnation of the greedy and self-serving present. Archibald is not exempt from MacLeod's critique of internal divisions within the cultural group, but indeed he has reinforced them with his exclusive notions of perfection.

"The Tuning of Perfection" is a departure for MacLeod from previous work. It is a generally more obvious story with fewer ambiguities in the development of themes and characters. The third person structure also lends a more objective account to the treatment cultural themes. The story of Archibald is a conscientious and pragmatic critique of cultural continuum and maintenance of tradition. However, in abandoning the first person reflective memory-based narrative, MacLeod has sacrificed the strong atmosphere and emotional intensity of earlier stories, and the intimate insights into cultural consciousness that empower "The Closing Down of Summer".

The concept of a geographic location's grip on the internal state of mind and sense of self is a strong theme in the most recent story "Island,"<sup>26</sup> in which

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<sup>26</sup> First published by Thistle-down Press, Saskatoon, 1989. Textual references here are to the collection The Lost Salt Gift of Blood: New and Selected Stories. (U.S. Edition), Ontario Review Press, 1988.

the central character, Agnes, is also a widowed cultural survivor of a past that is disconnected and lost to the modernizing world.

MacLeod's recurring motif of islands and isolated locations is most thoroughly employed in "Island", the story of Agnes MacPhedran, last survivor of a family of lighthouse keepers on a small island close to the Cape Breton shore. Not unlike Archibald, the detached isolation of her way of life is both a psychological condition and is associated with a deeply cultivated suspicion on the part of the rest of the community. It is important to note, however, that as a character, Agnes is endowed with few human characteristics outside of her solitude and longing. She is developed as a figurative representative of the misunderstood and undervalued feminine aspects of the culture itself. If some of MacLeod's earlier writings may be criticized on the basis of their fundamentally masculine perspective and insufficiently developed female characters, his later stories are perceptibly different in their attention to women as well as their mythological and symbolic treatment of the the feminine.

The introduction to Agnes and her island suggests a psychological state that accompanies isolation, one that obscures the distinction between reality and imagination. "They told themselves they were already used to it, coming as they did from a people in the far north of Scotland who had for generations been used to the sea and the sleet and the wind and the rocky outcrops at the edge of their part of Europe" (New and Selected, 83). MacLeod's opening paragraphs have already introduced Agnes as "[having] been born on the Island at a time so long ago that there was now nobody living who could remember it. The event no longer lived in anybody's mind nor was it recorded with accuracy anywhere on paper" (New and Selected, 80). The relation of the events of Agnes's life detail this association with an ambiguous and isolated existence in the past, dependent upon human memory for recognition. The

significance of her life mirrors that of the island: visible and accessible yet unfamiliar, uncharted, unrecorded, and uninhabited by others. In addition, Agnes herself is only ambiguously feminine, the result of an error on her inconsequential birth record that recorded her as "Angus". Agnes's gender is quite clearly presented as a disadvantage both in terms of her parents dependency upon her, and her opportunity for a fulfilling life.

Agnes's existence is one of transformation, born into duty and expectation, and clearly by virtue of her gender, not suitable to the conditions of her situation. She is lonely, given little consideration by her parents, and avoided by the seasonal fisherman who camp on the island during part of the year. As a woman, her only option appears to be "to live somewhere else" with the young redheaded man who courts her as a young girl. The vague nature of this phrase implies both her insularity and lack of knowledge of the outside world, as well as the historical record of the Gaelic culture's repeated displacement to unknown and ambiguous locations. The ghostly appearance of the young red headed stranger is presented as both her salvation and a foreshadowing of misfortune. Red hair is a traditional maritime omen of bad luck or tragedy, and his fleeting union with her begins a sequence of events that leads to her further isolation from mainland kin, and final resignation to the confinement of the island. The cruel irony of her hope for love and a future elsewhere, vanquished by his distant death, is the most intensely poignant and empathetic moment in the story, but her secret condition reveals Agnes to be one of the chosen:

It was as if he had been invisible to everyone but herself. . . . She had no photograph to emphasize reality. It was as if in vanishing from her future he had also vanished from her past. It was almost as if he had been a ghost, and as she advanced in her pregnancy she found the idea strangely attractive. (New and Selected, 92)

The Christian symbolism of her virginal existence and unexplained pregnancy are later associated with her relatives' fear and suspicion, and the church's condemnation is further fortified by her solitude and silence about the paternity of her child. These mysterious events gradually lend her a mystical status, and thus she is perceived not as a woman, but a defiant feminine figure with questionable powers who, in being denied the right to raise her child, is stripped of her human emotional needs and abilities. Agnes's position is very similar to the woman of "Vision" who is betrayed by her own people for the sake of the official requirements of the church. The fate of her black-haired daughter is unknown as the child grows to deny and eventually resent her undisclosed parentage.

It is Agnes's attempt to conceive a second child which forms the long central scene of the story. MacLeod uses the landscape to establish the depth to which Agnes and the island itself are one. Her superficial attachment to the island by virtue of her name is transcended by her solitary existence there in which she assumes the role of caretaker, not only the caretaker of the island, but of the sanctuary of the Gaelic culture and past. The afternoon leading up to the event is replete with sexual imagery beginning with Agnes's realization of her own physical desire and intensifying with the descriptions of frenzied spawning mackerel. The sexual union on the "table rock" bears a ceremonial element in which the rock itself becomes a communion table. There is a sense of sacrificial submission on the part of the men who perform the act, implying their innate awareness of her need to reproduce in order to continue her bloodlines. The length of the scene, the classical imagery of the sea, and the silence among them contribute to a sense of instinctual awareness and mutual respect. She is the keeper of the island, a sanctuary of the Gaelic culture, and they are indeed communing with the feminine embodiment of themselves in the

continuation of the race. The afternoon wanes, however, with images of death and waste:

The dogs lay above the waterline panting and watching everything. She was later to think how often she had watched them in the fury of their own mating. And how she had seen their surplus young placed in burlap bags, weighted down with rocks, and tossed over the boat's side into the sea. (New and Selected, 102)

The symbolic significance of the mackerel, so intensely fertile in their own desperate reproduction, then wastefully discarded back to the sea, parallels the unsuccessful sexual union on the shore. Agnes's hopes are again denied by fate, and it is too late to conceive the child that would replace herself, or the one lost to her relatives, who eventually "vanished into the mystery of Toronto" (New and Selected, 105).

The decades that transpire between this particular afternoon and the aged Agnes of the opening lines of the story detail the progressive modernization of the shore as marine and telecommunications technology, and transportation methods, experience profound change, to which Agnes herself is oblivious. These transformations are doubly realized in the shifting perception of Agnes herself as she gradually and somewhat generationally becomes familiar on the mainland as the "mad woman of the Island", a curiosity for outsiders and a quiet shame for local relatives. An inevitable visit from the 'government officials' informs her of her redundancy within the modern automated society. Both her necessity and her identity have been eclipsed, and she is struck by the revelation that she holds no legal title to the island. Agnes is effectively being cleared from her ancestral home, and she laments the landscape's inability to identify itself as such:

"Who would know?" she wondered, that this spot had once been called *achadh nan caoraich*, or that another was called *creig a bhoird*. And who

she thought, with a catch in her heart, would ever know of *Aite na cruinneachadh* and of what had transpired there. She looked across the landscape repeating the phrases of the place-names as if they were those of children about to be abandoned without knowledge of their names. She felt like whispering their names to them so they would not forget. (*New and Selected*, 106).

The concluding passage of the story is reminiscent of "The Road to Rankin's Point" in its ambiguous suggestion of a timeless and intangible chain of existence. The arrival of her grandson, the image of her lover, implies the generational continuation of the life cycle. The haunting finality of an emptied nameless landscape echoes the continuous and unrecorded migrations of Agnes's ancestors and of her descendants.

Agnes also invites comparison with the woman of "Vision" who, suffering rejection, alienates herself from the physical attachment to her kin, evolving into a mystical and visionary protector of the culture. The removal of Agnes's child by her own kin is also unmistakably linked to the experiences of the woman from "Vision" and those of Archibald, both figures who were subjected to suspicion and mistrust generated by a perception of unorthodox behaviour. As physical embodiments of the culture, their ostracization indicates a denial of the past that MacLeod attempts to reconstruct through these narratives. The reunion of Agnes and her grandson symbolizes the reconnection of the present placeless and nameless generation which has been denied a history, with a living culture that is inseparable from a landscape. Agnes is a figurative mother of the Gaelic race, illegitimate and unrecorded, but whose memories and testament will continue to exist within those who "live somewhere else".

MacLeod's highly conceptualized discussion of the Gaelic culture as a state of mind in "Perfection" and "Island" reflect his departure from the more formulized use of memory and internal monologue that characterize earlier work like "Closing Down". Moreover, the conclusions drawn from the two later



works regarding cultural continuity are broader and more detached from the inward emotional resignation of the earlier one. It is no accident that these protagonists all approach or surpass middle age and reflect a wisdom in reflection that embodies a mature experience. What all three do represent is the union of a private emotional experience and a collective cultural consciousness.

MacLeod has traced a series of isolations in this fictional journey. The isolation of labour in the mines cultivated dependency and the marginalization and the eventual collapse of the industry isolated a generation of outmigrants. The rural isolation that provided a habitat for the culture was altered by industrial development. Agnes's isolated island remains, but its significance has been lost. The covert victim is the Gaelic culture which perhaps failed internally to develop enough self-awareness to provide methods of defence. MacLeod's early consideration of the culture's future within these accounts is despondent and hopeless in regard to its silenced and obliterated past, a conclusion that has since been regarded as premature, given a renewed interest in Gaelic tradition during the late 1980's and early 1990's. Within the genesis of individual stories, his narrative voices emerge from a dynamic cultural response to change.

## Conclusion

The chronological approach undertaken in this thesis attempts to draw attention to three concurrent journeys embedded within the evolutionary opus of MacLeod's work. The most apparent journey is geographic, more specifically it traces the Highland Scots migrations to Cape Breton and the subsequent migrations of the people of Cape Breton toward central and western North America. On a thematic level, the focus of individual stories moves forward, beginning with memory of early experiences of self-discovery in an attempt to understand individual identity crisis, and simultaneously backward into the past and the origins of that self within an intergenerational chain of existence. These concurrent journeys gradually lead to an exploration of the present conditions of that heritage and culture, and deal specifically with themes of identity and outmigration.

The accomplishments contained within this extensive account of personal experience owe as much to MacLeod's maturing skill and technique as his acquired knowledge and understanding of his subject. There is, in this sense, a related artistic journey of the writer himself evident within significant departures within his own creative strategies, broadening the structural limitations more characteristic of early stories. The personal intimacy of the early work discussed in the first and second chapters, most predominantly manifested in the use of first person narration, proceeds as a continuous documentation of a first hand experience of outmigration and occupational culture in western Cape Breton during the 1950's and 1960's. Those accounts reflecting that culture at a certain point in the historical record, however, are much more focussed on the familial and personal crises enforced by imposed

modernization and economic crisis. These stories contain what may be termed as MacLeod's most ethnographical content and themes. In them, MacLeod makes a very conscious effort at a realistic portrayal of Cape Breton life and community culture, particularly through accounts of labour and livelihood.

In such stories as "In the Fall", "The Boat" and "Vastness", the young narrators' sense of uncertainty is deepened by their inability to find solace in the past, and the realization that they must face a precarious future that will be inherently different from that of their parents. Their recognition of imminent and profound change within their traditional communities is not recognized by senior family members, adding a further generational dimension to their isolation and insecurity. The culturally based expectation or obligation to make a life in these communities is made less possible by economic change, and in some cases less attractive by the availability of opportunity elsewhere. Characterized by a strong unity and immediacy, these stories are highly situated ones in which the land, the sea, and the underground, may simultaneously support and entrap those dependent upon their resources for survival.

MacLeod does not abandon this focus in later work; however, he does become more intensely concerned with transcendental elements of Scots-Gaelic ethnic culture and heritage. The stories "Vision", and "The Road to Rankin's Point", discussed here in Chapter III, maintain a strong intimacy and are aided by their treatments of ancestry and the mysteries of the genealogical past. They also make significant efforts to incorporate a broader narrative scope, resulting in a more complex structure. As well, MacLeod undertakes a considerable departure in terms of focus, moving beyond the limitations of first hand remembered experience into the realm of the collective oral record. This shift in perception corresponds to a wider, more inclusive generation gap in

which accepted notions of the past may cloak or outwardly conceal certain realities. These narrators, who evaluate past events in their own experience and inquire into previous lives uncover a complex web of human history, a continuum that they must explore in order to orient themselves in the uncertainty of the present. The narrative voice is more fixedly rooted in the present tense, travels more extensively into the past, and employs a geographic location, Cape Breton, as the link between ancient Gaelic Scotland and modern central Canada. In these particular stories, and in "As Birds", episodes of denial and escape from the past into the comforts and distractions of modernity are numerous. The restrained life that results is one programmed to conformity is implicitly critiqued, two examples being Calum's family, and the brothers of the narrator of "As Birds". These explorations of the resonance and resilience of the people of the past and their culture leads MacLeod to contemplate the present cultural strength of their descendants.

"The Closing Down of Summer", "The Tuning of Perfection" and "Island" represent a dramatic departure within the opus of his work, in which the narrative voice is removed from the physical trappings of the character who possesses it; the expression either internalized or outwardly released is the voice of the culture. The circumstances and challenges faced by the MacKinnon miner, Archibald, and Agnes, are those which threaten the culture itself. The issue of isolation is handled remarkably well in these stories in that its ability to preserve is not amplified in order to minimize its crippling effect on defensive strategies, and ability to progress and survive while keeping in step with change. Insularity is a blessing and a curse, and these accounts of Cape Breton do correspond generally to many island cultures who suffered similar crises of outmigration and population loss as a result of economic stagnation.

It would be not altogether untruthful to suggest that because MacLeod's

narrators age and therefore mature throughout these four successive chapters, they also communicate differently and more knowledgeably than their predecessors. However, to do so would be somewhat simplistic, for much valuable insight is provided by the adolescent narrators of Chapter II, as well as the children. It is more useful and more accurate to analyze the genesis of these individual voices by examining cultural observations they communicate. The voices of Chapter I, for example, reveal a lack of direction and knowledge that is not exclusively the result of childish inexperience. More significantly, these are the voices of those powerless to change their own circumstances. The darkness and fear that permeate "In the Fall" and "The Return", suspect or anticipate loss and irrevocable change during the 1950's when the economic situation in the primary sectors of Cape Breton was in crisis and the culture itself was beginning to lose ground. The voice of James in "Vastness" evokes the initial but incomplete acknowledgement of this loss through the documentation of departure and abandonment of community and tradition in 1960. Calum, the narrator of "The Road to Rankin's Point", is the first to question the nature of this loss and the irretrievable elements of the culture that have failed to survive in the rapidly modernizing world of the 1970's. The final curtain is drawn on the living culture by the miner in "Closing Down", which thematically amounts to a elegy for the career miner, and the Cape Breton Gael. The later voices of "As Birds" and "Vision", move toward recognizing and claiming this fractured heritage and identity, and simultaneously express the regret that arrived with contemplation of these losses from new and distant locations where outmigrants have carved out a new life. The resurgence of interest both locally and externally in the Gaelic Culture of Cape Breton during the 1980's seems to have influenced the more objective and optimistic musings of "Tuning of Perfection" which, through Archibald, addresses the challenges faced by the

cultural survivors. The latest story "Island" functions as a record of the undocumented, and attempts to encapsulate many of these themes through the metaphoric union of the islands of Scotland and the island of Cape Breton within Agnes MacPhedran's fictional island, a centuries old generational homeland from which she is eventually forced to depart "to live somewhere else." These shifting reflections are implicit, not overtly paced within the narrative. It seems clear, however, that specific insights within individual stories respond to shifting circumstances and the internal state of the culture itself from the 1950's onward as it became submerged and then experienced periodic re-emergence.

It is useful at this point in the discussion to examine some of the established critical perspectives on MacLeod's stories because responses to his work reflect considerably diverse opinion. Existing critical analysis of MacLeod's fiction is considerably sparse. A majority of that which exists in publication bears a decidedly Non-Canadian perspective, most of it published by either British or Scottish literary critics, foreign scholars studying temporarily in Canada, or Canadians studying in Britain and the United States. As well, the existing published criticism is decidedly more abundant with regard to The Lost Salt Gift of Blood, perhaps because, as a first collection, it was so unusually admired by accomplished Canadian fiction writers of the time.

Many of these critiques attempt to contextualize individual MacLeod stories in a number of ways. Several central concerns seem to recur within discussions of MacLeod's work: the historicity of his narratives, his relevance to both Scottish and Canadian literary fiction, and the construction of his characters, or more specifically, how that construction encompasses both an intense realism, and a universal element through their interaction with the

environment.

Perhaps in reviewing these diverse voices of analysis and critique, it would be best to begin at home in Cape Breton, where MacLeod finds himself described most commonly as a "regional writer" and a "realist". Harold Barrat, in his essay "Writing in Cape Breton: a Critical Introduction," is primarily concerned with MacLeod's accurate portrayal of the people and communities of Cape Breton Island in stories from The Lost Salt Gift of Blood: "The environment is also important in Alistair MacLeod's collection of meticulously wrought short stories. . . . Indeed the environment moulds and sometimes distorts human beings. Sometimes, too, character and landscape seem indistinguishable" .

Barrat is particularly interested in MacLeod characters who possess an unusually compelling relationship with the landscape of their island:

The Cape Breton landscape--whether it is the claustrophobic coal mine, or the hummocked fields, or the soft, female lines of the island's hills, or the encircling, womblike sea--is not a pallid decorative backdrop. It emerges as a crucial part of the island's history and identity. It is a very difficult thing to define, but it is nonetheless a palpable presence and, as we have seen, it sometimes plays an important role in the growing consciousness of those who live in its shadow.<sup>27</sup>

These interesting observations are limited specifically to stories from the first collection, and most accurately to stories discussed here in Chapter I and II. MacLeod is a gifted realist, and his early work reflects a very personal and intimate understanding of the experience of migration and exile. Barrat makes an honest acknowledgement: MacLeod's use of landscape is difficult to define. In these early stories there is a dominant sense of entrapment with regard to the landscape. At the same time, there is an implicit yearning for its insular

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<sup>27</sup> Harold Barrat, "Writing in Cape Breton: A Critical Introduction" Essays on Canadian Writing 31 (1985): 175-191.

enclosures and isolated extremes. It is the geographic exile to distant locations out of which his narrative voices speak in latent regret, but in retrospect, the landscape is truly one reconstructed through memory. The isolated and windswept farm of "In the Fall", the photo image of the fisherman father in "The Boat", fantastically enlarged against the seascape, and the retreating figure of the coal miner grandfather in "The Return", etched against the scarred hillside, are all imbued with thematic imagery and significance that really does not limit the landscape to the role of a functional realistic setting. The landscape is in this sense textured to reflect the narrator's psychological struggle within his own memory.

In Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction, Janice Kulyk-Keefer examines MacLeod in the context of Maritime Literature, arguing that "with Alistair MacLeod's Lost Salt Gift of Blood, we arrive at a species of realism which, though lyrical, is as constrained by the harsh conditions of everyday life as is Nowlan's and Richards's, and which is as dependent on history and cultural tradition as is Maillet's."<sup>28</sup> Keefer's discussion is concerned with a comparative examination of various Maritime writers' portrayal of Maritime experience. Her discussion of The Lost Salt Gift of Blood supports the classification of MacLeod as a writer consumed by the experiential realities of Cape Breton life, mainly struggles with the harsh elements of environment and labour as the most deterministic of factors in existence. Keefer is not unaware, however, of the thematic elements of the work which transcend the regional: "But MacLeod, careful as he is to make real for us the material conditions which pressure his characters, is also concerned to show us how their entrapment has a significance which transcends particulars of period and place by the universal

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<sup>28</sup> Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 182-184.



of time and death." These are welcome points, but Keefer chooses not to elaborate on exactly how he manages to successfully accomplish this task. Keefer seems reluctant to venture too far from her own contextual restrictions: the relevance of MacLeod to the body of Maritime fiction. As a result, she has excluded many facets of the narrative and its thematic scope. Her discussion fails to accommodate the deeper identity of MacLeod's people, continuing to relegate them to strictly Cape Breton occupational identities. Her early reference to history and cultural traditions is not effectively supported in her discussion, one that is devoid of analysis regarding the Gaelic cultural content that constitutes a major recurring topic.

Francis Berces constructs an intriguing analysis not unrelated to Keefer's above observation in the article "Existential Maritimer: Alistair MacLeod's The Lost Salt Gift of Blood." <sup>29</sup> Berces's analysis does contribute support for Keefer's statement that MacLeod breaks through the limitations of his own region to a universal level. Ultimately, as indicated in the title of his article, he perceives MacLeod's characters as bordering on suicidal, or at the least contemplating the futility of their existence in the face of overwhelming odds. This critical stance places the universal aspects of MacLeod's work into a rigid theoretical paradigm quite unnecessarily. However, Berces does provide insight into the psychological complexities of what I have described as MacLeod's convergent landscapes:

MacLeod's realism is as much inward and psychological as it is geographical, and it is through the interaction of psychology with a specific place that his realism takes on complexity and more than local interest. My position, in fact, is that MacLeod's achievement as a realistic Maritime writer is to have made literary form a means of philosophic insight. Regional events of a simple and familiar nature unfold routinely in appearance, but they are freshly perceived to evoke unsuspected

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<sup>29</sup> Francis Berces, "Existential Maritimer: Alistair MacLeod's The Lost Salt Gift of Blood", Studies in Canadian Literature, 16 (1991): 115-128.

depths and perspectives.

Unfortunately, Berces seems to resist the possibility that rural life experiences may contain universal statements without the support of a broad philosophical paradigm like existentialism. I would argue that it is MacLeod's humanistic approach to common elements of experience: family conflict, grief, departure from home, alienation, and rejection, that constitute the universal properties of his work. Berces seems to connect to the work on an extremely intellectual level, possibly due to a basic unfamiliarity with the Atlantic region and particularly with Cape Breton. He seems unaware that "regional events" like the Springhill Mining disasters are neither simple nor routine in the collective consciousness of the people.

MacLeod's relevance to both Canada and Scotland provides for an interesting dichotomy between scholars on both sides of the Atlantic who contemplate his exploration of ethnic and cultural, if not national, identities. I have argued that the consciously evoked Scots content of his work increases throughout the opus of stories, beginning with "The Road to Rankin's Point" in 1976. This particular story is discussed by Christopher Gittings in "Sounds in the Empty Spaces of History,"<sup>30</sup> a comparative study of MacLeod and Scottish author Neil Gunn's novel Highland River. Gittings finds that parallels exist not only within thematic focus, the return to a landscape that echoes with the voices of ancestry and vital Gaelic cultural heritage, but with regard to specific imagery and symbolic content as well. Suitably as a result, Gittings tends to accentuate what is on the whole a minor technique in the story: the legendary music and fate of the MacCrimmons. Their contribution to the story as a whole is in support

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Gittings, "Sounds in the Empty Spaces of History: The Highland Clearances in Neil Gunn's Highland River and Alistair MacLeod's "The Road to Rankin's Point", Studies in Canadian Literature 17.1. (1992): 93-103.

of the fact that Calum can not find a link that would enable them to remain relevant to his life in the 1970's. There is no doubt that "Rankin's Point" is concerned with the relevance and obscurity of ancestry, however, Calum's realization that he feels the same way about his grandmother, that they are being eclipsed within their own lifetime, is what contributes to the parallel themes of physical and cultural death. In his discussion of a Scottish novelist and a Canadian short fiction writer, Gittings attempts to reveal a symbiotic treatment of the erosion of the Gaelic culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Gittings suggests that MacLeod's efforts toward the reconstruction of a cultural past are correspond to a Scottish identity crisis, partially derived from the imposition of English educational curriculum that failed to preserve and communicate Scottish history to the Scottish people. He quotes Cairns Craig:

What Scottish novelists have had to do again and again in recent times is to link their novel to some moment of historical dynamism which intrudes upon the historyless Scottish community: Scotland can only be known through narrative in these moments when narrative possibilities are forced upon a society that has lost all sense of its own narrative.<sup>31</sup>

I would argue that MacLeod is not directly limited by this suggested void of Scottish history. MacLeod's Cape Breton Gael escaped this deprivation to a degree, through the retention of cultural knowledge that was transported to Cape Breton prior to British domination. Although his earlier naturalistic portrayal of Cape Breton life is devoid of a conscious past, in "Rankin's Point" through exposure to fracture and separation, or a "moment of historical dynamism", MacLeod explores a past which predates British controlled Scotland, reaching beyond the disruption of emigration to an intact Gaelic world, within which no other "moments of historical dynamism" are available. Nevertheless, Gittings makes an excellent argument that a historyless Scotland

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<sup>31</sup> Cairns Craig, "The Body in the Kit Bag: History and the Scottish Novel", *Cancrastus* 1 (1979): 18-22 as quoted in Gittings.

described by Cairns is directly comparable to the cultureless Canada of the 1960's, acknowledged by W.H. New's A History of Canadian Literature:

For several prominent writers of the Sixties, Seventies, and early Eighties, the historicity of heritage was a motif that shaped still larger canvases, in which the autonomy of historical events and the subjectivity of the individual record of history are related but separate measures of the reality of experience.<sup>32</sup>

According to New, the lack of a definite Canadian identity created a generation of Canadian writers who possessed an urge to disqualify the negative dearth of Canadian character within its own literature.

Within reach of the silenced Gaelic past, MacLeod is also simultaneously influenced by his own generation of new (1960's) Canadian literary consciousness of covert ethnic heritage. New's discussion of the subjectivity of individual record and the reality of experience addresses an important distinction between fiction dependent upon historical fact, and that which generates its own historicity through narrative. His point is not unrelated to one made by Berces's discussion of MacLeod's rendering of Cape Breton settings:

As is true for consciousness, place in fiction is a condition of perception. It is needed to define the self and may come to be seen finally as the ultimate reality. A similar though unintended extinction of the self may occur when fiction which is more than usually faithful to current events, history, or regional details leads to readings during which factual comparisons occur at the expense of the integrative power in mimetic perceptions.

Berces makes an invaluable observation as well in drawing a distinction between historical fiction, and fiction that generates its own historicity through relevant psychological perceptions. MacLeod exhibits an intentional avoidance of overt and distracting historical or political content in his work. Although quite possible, it is unnecessary to pinpoint the exact locations in time of these

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<sup>32</sup> W.H.New, A History of Canadian Literature (London: MacMillan Education, 1989) 93.

stories. MacLeod provides enough context through his first person narration to support the fictional world that is contained within each story. Critics and readers alike may find that tying the story to a reality based time frame makes understanding the external realities within the story a bit easier, but for MacLeod plausibility is far more important than historical framework. The work is only rarely concerned with forceful historical events like those found in "Vastness". He consistently employs the intergenerational context for a time continuum, as in "Vision", a story that manages to encompass several centuries through the accounts of the familial, or as New would term it "individual record" of history.

From a historical perspective for instance, specific events that play a role in the narrative, like war, or mining disaster, are secondary to the internal state of mind of the narrator who in recollecting his personal experience, makes reference to these forceful external events. But because the readers share the perspective of the narrator, they are only indirectly subject to external aspects of setting. Nevertheless, they experience the past with such intensity and immediacy, the distortions of memory become diminished. Readers experience the narrator's personal, emotional responses to the physical world, and in turn they respond on an intimate and personal level to the presentation of the past.

MacLeod's skill in the creation of dramatic intensity is important to acknowledge with regard to this difficult achievement. As Berces pointed out, there is a danger that historical and political references create confusion, and may actually work to diminish the power and force of the fictional world. MacLeod's use of dialogue is pertinent to this aspect of the work. In general it is sparse, carefully placed, and in many cases is not a source of character development, but is employed to place the narrator in a specific time frame recreated by his memory. Much dialogue is the recreation of the narrator who

relates a time from the past, in which accurate reconstruction of conversations, or exactly what was said, is sacrificed to what is remembered, which is in effect the lasting connotations, not the words. The only spoken words that memory will record are ones that transcend the necessary by their implications for the future tense from which he relates the story. This contributes to a sense of ambiguity regarding spoken word, as it's meaning is infused with a knowledge of the future already in the possession of the reader. One of the best examples of this is the opening line of "In The Fall": "We will just have to sell him," I remember my mother saying with finality" (LSGB, 7 ). After the story is told, these words contain profound connotations imbued with finality, and the representative sale of a past and a way of life that is gone. MacLeod's consistence with this technique forms an important part of his narrative strategy, in which he encapsulates the past or particular periods of the past within the struggles of individuals.

Jane Urquhart describes MacLeod's stories as "in their portrayal of an ancestral past that continually affects the present and in their sense of deep yearning for forsaken landscapes, as fresh and as complex as the present moment" <sup>33</sup>. She places a strong emphasis on the Canadian story that MacLeod tells. Her position is in this sense opposed to that of Gittings, who is preoccupied with demonstrating MacLeod's debt to his Scots heritage as the only source that informs his work. The mutual agreement that Canada and Scotland need each other in the cooperative efforts to contemplate their historical relationship as it manifests itself in the literature of both countries is both interesting and ironic. If Gittings enlarges aspects of MacLeod's Scots content, Urquhart speaks from a very broad, and somewhat idealistic Canadian

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Urquhart, "Afterword", to the NCL edition of As Birds Bring Forth the Sun (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992) 169.

consciousness:

We Canadians are, after all, a nation composed of people longing for a variety of abandoned homelands and the tribes that inhabited them, whether these be the distant homelands of our recent immigrants, the abducted homelands of our native peoples, the rural homelands vacated by the post-war migrations to the cities, or the various European or Asian homelands left behind by our earliest settlers. All of us have been touched in some way or another by this loss of landscape and of kin, and all of us are moved by the sometimes unidentifiable sorrow that accompanies such a loss.

Urquhart makes a welcome point about MacLeod's relevance to the Canadian experience, but it is doubtful that the majority of us would be sufficiently conscious of this condition to agree with her. I would argue that MacLeod attempts to reveal this dilemma and does so successfully, but that the need to do so reveals its buried significance to the modern Canadian consciousness. Various narrators who struggle with conflicting notions of tradition and modernity have sufficient experience of both worlds to sense a division within themselves. This state of mind is now the exception, not the norm. It is in this context that MacLeod's stories are all in some way about living somewhere else. The present is consistently dependent upon a past. The momentary experience is indebted to previous experiences. MacLeod suggests that it is possible to live in diverse locales simultaneously through memory and imagination. Furthermore, it is possible for one to actually be "more alive" in the alternate location than in the reality that comprises one's everyday existence. The yearning for another landscape may be in fact the desire to reconnect to a self that has been lost in continuous transformation. It is not unlike the re-connection to a youthful or innocent self that many seek out during the latter stages of adulthood, but this exploration of the self is a more complicated one that does not avail itself to nostalgic recollection. Just as Calum is more alive in the contemplation of the lives of his ancestors, as is the

narrator of "Vision", so the narrator of "The Boat" is more alive during his nocturnal struggles with the past and the life he abandoned. The MacKinnon miner is more alive underground, though he equates it with a kind of premature death, and *Mac An Amharis* is more alive in the ancient Canna of *Colum Cille* than the restrained life he lives as his own. The repetition of the phrase "to live somewhere else" in the story "Island", therefore, has more than one conceptual meaning:

There is a sense in which all of MacLeod's work is more or less part of one great story with a single great theme. This is a tale of the long homeward journey from exile. As a yearning for perfection, the motif has a religious aura of being exiled from our father's land. As a response to our time, it sees the "backward look" as a way forward. While home is a shifting locale, a country of the mind that one moment may be rural Cape Breton, or at other moments either the Gaelic past or childhood, or perhaps a lost sense of community and physical life, more likely it is a combination of the things and worlds from which we have become regrettably alienated.<sup>34</sup>

Essentially, what is happening from the outset in these stories, begins with a sense of loss, or a notion that something is missing. The natural instinct is a return to the past in search for an answer to this dilemma. MacLeod incorporates into this quest journeys that are geographic, emotional, and ancestral, asking questions that might provide some insight into why these characters all exhibit a similar yearning for self-knowledge. Visitations through memory like "In the Fall", "To Everything", and "Winter Dog", are permeated with unresolved and unexpressed regret. The experiences of outmigration and separation documented in "The Boat", "Vastness" and "The Return", examine a cultural alienation from varying perspectives. These stories do answer some of the questions. The transition from rural to urban and traditional to modern ways

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<sup>34</sup> Ken MacKinnon, "Alistair MacLeod's Fiction: Long Journey Homeward from Exile", Atlantic Provinces Book Review, 13.2 (1986).



of life only gets at the surface, or more obvious levels of disassociation and isolation. More complex distress is apparent in the exploration of previous generations as in "The Road to Rankin's Point", "Vision", and "As Birds", whose stories are told through second hand remembrance, and whose reality lies in conflict with accepted notions of the past. There is in this sense, a kind of resolution that comes out of uncovering the past. However, for those dwelling in the present, reconciliation with this new found knowledge comes only after an examination of the present. The earliest attempt to explore the present resulted in the proclamation of the death of the culture expressed in "The Closing Down of Summer". This story is more about mourning than death itself, and not only acknowledges cultural demise, but attempts to provide a kind of testimonial. It is a lament for a way of life that has been eclipsed, but moreover, identifies the widening generation gaps that spelled disaster for cultural retention. The story also introduces the concept of external perceptions and marketing of culture to outsiders as a damaging factor with regard to the culture's integrity. This issue is of course expanded upon in "The Tuning of Perfection", in which there is an overt battle between the external and internal perceptions and values of Scots Gaels and those who seek to exploit their musical traditions. This story and "Vision" are the first to conclude with optimistic observations.

The story "Island" returns to many themes found in previous work like "In the Fall" through the resilience of characters in their determination to remain on the land that is theirs by birthright, and in their isolation, both in terms of landscape and encroaching modernity. "Island" also bears similarities to "Vision" through the characters of Agnes and the blind woman, and is strongly connected to "The Road to Rankin's Point" in its treatment of themes of intergenerational communication and ancestral loss.

MacLeod suggests that self-knowledge is almost always within reach if

not already apparent, but often remains submerged, and the difficulty lies within the journey toward awareness:

Well, the world we live in is not necessarily all that we have. And the world that we comprehend intellectually is not all that we have either. A lot of these characters are not instant North Americans. They go back a long way and, whether this is any good or not, they have no choice. You cannot not know what you do know.<sup>35</sup>

Several insights into MacLeod's artistic journey are contained in this ambiguous statement. The first, a reference to "instant North Americans" implies that although appearances suggest that individuals may consciously decide to deny a cultural heritage in exchange for a broad homogeneous identity that is easily assimilated into the mass culture, their transition from one position to the other is not as simple as one would hope. The attempt to dismiss one's own background in order to get on with modern urban life with less complication does not necessarily break the chain of culturally learned patterns and characteristics. The next comment, "you cannot not know what you do know", suggests that cultural identity may become submerged, either intentionally or inadvertently, but the knowledge of it cannot be unlearned or discarded.

Many would argue that altered social class or the adoption of a professional status immediately severs the cultural link to the previous identity and the individual abandons any connection to that cultural group. MacLeod suggests that the connection runs much deeper than external and superficial issues of social class or professional status, and indeed that it need not be completely destroyed by migration away from the community.

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Fortier, "Interview: Alistair MacLeod", Books in Canada (Fall 1988).

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