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**‘His great heart remained behind’:
Constructions of Identity in Alistair MacLeod’s
Fiction**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

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by

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Abstract

Alistair MacLeod's short stories and novel (*No Great Mischief*) are widely read and critically praised. His writing focuses on the lives of the people of 20th century Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and many of his characters are of Scottish descent. He writes of the Island's miners, fishermen and farmers, as well as the younger generation who increasingly leave their island homeland to pursue higher education and greater job opportunities. As a result of this out-migration, much of MacLeod's work mourns the passing of the Island's traditional, rural culture. MacLeod's writing combines detailed and compelling physical description with metaphor and symbolism. This thesis looks at the ways in which the identity of the Islanders is constructed in MacLeod's work; and how the myths of the Islanders' minds collide with the physical reality of their lives. The four main themes that are analysed in the thesis are: Scotland, Journeys, Animals, and Death. Scotland is depicted as both a physical location, and a mythical 'homeland', synonymous with the exile and victimisation associated with the Scottish Diaspora. The Islanders' lives are defined by the journeys they make to and from the Island. The modes of transport that enable these journeys are explored, including boats, cars and aeroplanes. Physical journeys often support the emotional journeys of the characters. 'Horse and Hound', the chapter on animals, provides a unique analysis of MacLeod's depiction of the human-animal relationship (seen especially with horses and dogs), and animal symbolism. The deaths and ill treatment of whales, bulls and dogs are linked to the demise of the Island's traditional culture. Violent and premature deaths occur in many of MacLeod's works. This thesis discusses how a dead body is both a symbol of a life lost, but also a physical object which the families must deal with in their isolated island locations.

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‘All of us are better when we’re loved.’

No Great Mischief, Alistair MacLeod

Dedicated to those who love me, and make me better for it.

Preface

Throughout the course of researching this thesis, many people have asked how, as a student at a New Zealand university, I came to be studying the works of a writer from Nova Scotia. Some people have assumed that the stories I have been studying can only have relevance to those from the Cape Breton of which Alistair MacLeod writes, or who have experienced the lives and losses which inspired him. It is true that you can read MacLeod's works as being from Cape Breton, from Nova Scotia, from Canada, but only if you choose to view them through such lens. What young person reads MacLeod's earlier stories, like 'The Vastness of The Dark', and cannot relate to the bittersweet feeling of leaving home? For myself, I read 'The Boat' and think of my grandfather, who spent a lifetime farming in the King Country of New Zealand. I think of an intelligent but illiterate man who sacrificed an education in order to farm because it was a means for him to support his family, and, as MacLeod puts it, it is 'braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want than selfishly following forever your dreams and inclinations' (21).¹ I also think of my father's decision to pursue a university education, and thus escape the physical labouring life that his father had endured.

I see my own family in MacLeod's stories because his stories are universal. He writes of the human journey, which is irrespective of time or place. His stories focus on the daily tragedies and triumphs as well as the larger events which mark our lives. He captures the loss of innocence in 'Second Spring', the first lie told in 'Winter Dog', and the bittersweet reunion of a family around a hospital bed in 'As Birds Bring Forth the Sun'. MacLeod's use of language and imagery transforms deformed miners into modern Highland warriors and the description of a dead seal into 'something more arresting than

¹ All references to MacLeod's short stories come from *Island: Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 2002). All page references given in parenthesis.

life itself' (260). In the beginning stages of this project, when asked why I was studying Alistair MacLeod, I would explain that I have Canadian heritage, and like MacLeod, I am a descendent of Scottish emigrants. But that answer is really an explanation of how I came to read MacLeod. I *studied* MacLeod because his work is rich, well-crafted and challenging, and what more could a student of English Literature ask for.

A Beginning

‘To recognise the awesomeness of the great in the dazzling brilliance of the small requires that that which is small must first be perfectly rendered and understood. And then all things are possible.’²

Alistair MacLeod

‘Perfectly rendered’ is an apt description for the creative works of Canadian author, Alistair MacLeod. His stories are meticulously crafted so that each word, phrase and image contributes to the story’s overall impact on the reader. His language is precise and at times sparse. He rarely uses figurative allusions, preferring to capture the horror or poignancy of a scene with the brutal honesty of a literal description. His writing is grounded in the places he writes of. The stories set in Cape Breton are textured with blood from a slaughtered animal, the blackened faces of the miners emerging from the mines, the sweat of horses as they pull sleighs, and the snow and sea which define the lives of an Islander. His later works increasingly reflect on other places: imagined places like a mythical Scotland, places of the past as adult characters recall their childhood, and the places across North America where the outbound Cape Breton Islanders go to make their new homes. If Cape Breton is in fact ‘two islands on an island. One an island of farms and music and Gaelic, and another an island of steel and coal’³, then MacLeod writes of both.

² Alistair MacLeod, ‘The Canadian Short Story’, in *Dominant Impressions: Essays on The Canadian Short Story*, ed. by Gerald Lynch and Angela Arnold Robbeson (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999), pp. 161-166 (p. 166).

³ Sheldon Currie, *Down The Coaltown Road* (Bolton, Ontario: Key Porter Books, 2002), p. 55.

Although MacLeod's work is not autobiographical, he acknowledges that as a writer you 'write what you see around you, what your fears and your loves are'.⁴ MacLeod's own life experiences are woven into the lives of his characters. Like the young men of 'The Boat' and 'The Vastness of the Dark', he is a farmer's son who pursued an academic career. He has had an urban, professional life away from Nova Scotia, like the Montreal-based lawyer of 'The Return' or the man who lives in the 'North American mid-west' (122) of 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood'. In the long anticipated *No Great Mischief*, 'MacLeod the author' becomes another of the many versions of the red headed warrior, the '*gille beag Ruadh*' (NGM 16), who populate the story. MacLeod names his central character 'Alexander', Gaelic for Alistair. When the fictional Alexander drives through 'south western Ontario' (NGM 1) on his way to Toronto, it is hard not to imagine his journey as starting in the south Ontario city of Windsor, where MacLeod has lived most of his adult life. More than his own history, MacLeod weaves Scottish history into the heritage of his characters, so that the fictional MacDonald clan of *No Great Mischief*⁶ are descended from the 'real' MacDonald clan who were massacred at Glencoe.⁷

This thesis focuses on four interconnected themes, which each explore MacLeod's focus on the construction of the identity and the sense of belonging in the Cape Breton Islanders of Scottish descent. Scotland is viewed by many of MacLeod's characters as the 'Home' country, and the effect of such a viewpoint on the character's understanding of their identity is explored in 'A Kingdom of the Mind – *Scotland*'. The motif of journeys runs

⁴ MacLeod qtd. in Colin Nicholson, 'Signatures of Time: Alistair MacLeod and his Short Stories', *Canadian Literature*, 107 (1987), 90-110 (p. 91).

⁵ The documentary *Reading MacLeod*, dir. by William D. McGillivray (Picture Plan in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada, 2005) includes interviews with MacLeod's publishers at McClelland and Stewart, in which they discuss the process of waiting for, and finally collecting the finished manuscript of the much awaited first novel by Alistair MacLeod.

⁶ Alistair MacLeod, *No Great Mischief* (London: Vintage, 2001). All references to *No Great Mischief* given in parenthesis with initials NGM, as (NGM 42).

⁷ Members of the MacDonald clan were killed at the Massacre of Glencoe, 1692. 'Massacre of Glencoe.' *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. <<http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/EBchecked/topic/235254/Massacre-of-Glencoe>> [accessed 28th April 2011].

through all of the chapters. ‘Stepping Forward, Looking Back – *Journeys*’ looks at both the physical journeys undertaken in MacLeod’s stories, as well as the journeys of the mind. In ‘Horse and Hound – *Animals*’ the animal and human relationship is discussed, as is MacLeod’s use of animals as symbols of the traditional rural way of life in Cape Breton. Death is ever-present in the stories, from the risk of death for the original *Clann Chalum Ruaidh* as they voyage to Cape Breton, to violent and accidental deaths in the mines. ‘Burdening Bodies – *Death*’ explores how deaths are coped with in the isolated areas, and close-knit communities of MacLeod’s Cape Breton.

Alistair MacLeod and MacLeod Scholarship

Over a nearly forty year period, MacLeod has produced a concise, but stimulating collection of stories focusing on the rural lives of the Scottish Canadians who live on Cape Breton Island. His short story collections, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun* (1986), have been critically well received, and his stories have been widely anthologised.⁸ *No Great Mischief* (1999) was awarded the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2001. The 2000 collection *Island* includes all previously published short stories as well as several new additions. MacLeod’s work has been translated into many languages, including Gaelic. A short film was made in 1983, based on the story ‘In the Fall’. A stage adaptation of *No Great Mischief* has been produced and performed, and there has even been an opera written, *Island*, based on MacLeod’s stories. It is not going too far to say that MacLeod is a very much loved member of the Canadian literary community, a fact demonstrated by the limited negative literary criticism of his work, and the huge public attendance at any public reading or ‘MacLeod’ event.

⁸ MacLeod’s short stories have been included in over fifteen anthologies. ‘The Boat’ (1968) and ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ (1974) were selected, respectively, for the 1969 and 1975 editions of *Best American Short Stories*, published by Houghton-Mifflin. ‘As Birds Bring Forth the Sun’ was included in the 1986 edition of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*. ‘The Boat’ has been taught widely in Canadian schools for several decades.

MacLeod was born in 1936, in North Battleford, Saskatchewan and was raised in Inverness County, on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. After finishing high school and a period spent working as a miner, a fisher, a logger and a teacher, MacLeod completed his education at St Francis Xavier University (B.A., 1960), the University of New Brunswick (M.A., 1961) and the University of Notre Dame (Ph.D., 1968). MacLeod taught English Literature and Creative Writing for many years at the University of Windsor, and was the fiction editor for *The Windsor Review*. He received the Order of Canada in 2008 in recognition for his contribution to Canadian literature. MacLeod still returns to his house at Cape Breton Island each summer, as he has done for most of his adult life.

The themes and ideas considered in this thesis are written with an awareness of, and gratitude for, those scholars who have already provided much thoughtful criticism on the writing of Alistair Macleod. Most previous scholarship on MacLeod has approached his work through thinking about him as a regional writer and has discussed his work in light of ‘regionalism’, a term which in the Canadian context refers to the concerns ‘of those outside the heartland of central Canada. The West, the North, and the Atlantic Provinces’.⁹ ‘Regionalism’ as a concept, in both literature but also more widely in thinking on art, history and the other humanities, came to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the same time as MacLeod’s early work was gaining recognition. The first wave of thinking on regional literature was that ‘it had two basic concerns: to focus upon a distinctive experience (whether real or mythical) and to experiment with ways of relating that experience.’¹⁰ More recent thought on the term links it to a ‘concern for *place*’¹¹ in a much broader sense, rather than a term for works of writers from, or texts set in, a certain geographically defined area or region. Janice Kulyk Keefer’s *Under Eastern*

⁹ Herb Wylie, ‘Writing, Regionalism and Globalism in a Post-Nationalist Canada’, in *Diverse Landscapes: Re-Reading Places Across Cultures in Contemporary Canadian Writing*, eds. Karin Beeler and Dee Horne (Prince George, B.C.: University of Northern British Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 10-18 (p. 11).

¹⁰ William Westfall, ‘On The Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature’, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15. 2 (1980), pp. 3-15 (p. 3).

¹¹ Wylie, p. 11.

*Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*¹² is an important work on this topic, although published over two decades ago. Harold Barratt provides a good consideration of MacLeod's work, along with Sheldon Currie's *The Glace Bay Miner's Museum* and several other Cape Breton novels of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in light of 'Cape Breton nationalism'.¹³ Lisa Chalykoff¹⁴ and Glenn Willmott¹⁵ offer more recent contributions to this discussion, in more general Canadian terms.

Substantial literary criticism has also been written on gender roles in MacLeod's work, and understandably so. All but one of the MacLeod stories are told by a male protagonist, and many of the stories are set around the working lives of men in masculine, physical environments; on boats, farms and mines. The women are frequently kept as two-dimensional characters of domesticity and practicality. The wives in 'The Boat', 'The Return' and 'In the Fall' are all shrill voices of realism, pointing out to their sentimental husbands that education and reading will not bring in more fish, that things are more ordered and genteel in urban Montreal than rural Cape Breton, or that a beloved pet must be sold to feed the children. David Creelman gives a thoughtful analysis of MacLeod's use of female characters, including an insightful discussion of the differences between the treatment of women in the two short story collections. Creelman suggests that *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* features 'more traditional and patriarchal representations of the feminine' and that the feminine becomes a 'passive space' which is used to 'supplement the masculine drive towards certainty.'¹⁶ As a counter to this argument, Christina Jane

¹² Janice Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). The chapter 'Going or Staying: Maritime Paradigms' (pp. 211-238) is particularly relevant.

¹³ Harold Barratt, 'Writing in Cape Breton: A Critical Introduction', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 31 (1985), 175-191 (p. 175).

¹⁴ Lisa Chalykoff, 'Overcoming the Two Solitudes of Canadian Literary Regionalism', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 23 (1998), 160-177.

¹⁵ Glenn Willmott, 'Region: The Invisible City and the Abstract Empire', in *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), pp. 144-195.

¹⁶ David Creelman, "'Hoping to Strike Some Sort of Solidity": The Shifting Fictions of Alistair MacLeod', *Studies In Canadian Literature*, 24. 2 (1999), 79-99 (pp. 92-93).

Vasil points out in her discussion on gender construction in MacLeod that ‘one of the most ironic aspects of MacLeod’s stories is that, despite their focus on men, they tend to reveal the women as the true survivors.’¹⁷ It is the women who are the hardened ambassadors of the tough story of life on Cape Breton Island. Often through necessity they have become stoic symbols of survival at all costs in extremely isolated and impoverished conditions. The grandmother in ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’ is a good example of this resilient Island woman figure that MacLeod quietly celebrates.

I hope that this thesis both contributes to the existing conversations on MacLeod’s work, and sparks new thoughts and discussions. Alistair MacLeod’s connection to Scotland, and the influence of his Cape Breton Scottish culture on his writing, has been widely noted by MacLeod scholars and I have called on such scholarship in the writing of ‘A Kingdom of the Mind- *Scotland*’. I have given particular consideration to MacLeod’s depiction of modern Scotland, which previous criticism has ignored. It is hard to read, and write about MacLeod, and not be struck by the many forms of journeys which his characters undertake, both physical and emotional. I have chosen to think about these journeys through the modes of transport which facilitate them, and in doing so hope to have provided a new perspective on MacLeod’s use of the journey motif. In many of MacLeod’s stories, the animals are as important as the humans, yet in my reading of MacLeod criticism, I have not been able to find more than passing references to the horses, dogs and other animals which populate his works. The study of animals in literature is an emerging area of academic research, and I believe that ‘Horse and Hound’ makes a meaningful, and unique, contribution to this new discipline. Death is a widely explored concern in MacLeod’s work, and many scholars have touched on MacLeod’s detailing of untimely and tragic deaths, especially the death of the father in ‘The Boat’.

¹⁷ Christina Jane Vasil, ‘Ann-Marie MacDonald in the Context of Hugh MacLennan and Alistair MacLeod: Gender Formation in Three Cape Breton Writers.’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Acadia University, 1998), p. 24.

My focus on the physical burden that a death places on the family, and my exploration of colour and light imagery, considers this important theme from a fresh perspective.

Highlandisation

Much of this thesis deals with ideas of identity and belonging for the Cape Breton Islanders of Scottish descent, thus it is necessary to know some of the history of Scotland, and of Nova Scotia. The history which is relevant to the Scottish connections in the work of Alistair MacLeod is not the history of dates and numbers, but the story of myths; their creation, the stories which gave them their genesis, and the meaning these myths have to those who continue to tell them. The image of the brave Highlander seeps over into the myth of the exiled, yet resilient victim of the land clearances, which have become the central images of the modern Scottish Diaspora. The more deliberately constructed myth of Nova Scotia as 'New Scotland' and a place of pre-industrial, quaint innocence contradicts these earlier creations of misty memory, and is even more at odds with the 20th century reality of life in Nova Scotia: a life of physical labour, of mining strikes and unemployment, of out-migration and increasing reliance on the tourist dollar.

For the purposes of this study, there are three main aspects of 18th and 19th century Scottish history of relevance: the Jacobite rebellion and subsequent development of the 'Highland' myth, the rise of 'tartanry', kilts, bagpipes and other recognisable images of 'Scotland', and the much romanticised land clearances of the Scottish Highlands. The beginning of the popular image of the Highlander as a rough, but heroic and physically imposing (and usually red headed and bearded) warrior can be traced to the Jacobite cause of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. What began as support for installing James VII and II to the throne of England, Scotland and Ireland, grew into a cause which

championed Scottish nationalism and defended Scottish liberty.¹⁸ The reigning monarch, William III, was keen to dissuade clans from supporting the rebellious cause, and this led to events like the 1692 massacre of Glencoe. Many of the clan survived this Crown-sanctioned attack; a fact which added to the image of resilient and brave Highlanders who fought gallantly for their cause. Support for the Jacobites continued to build until the failed 1715 uprising. Over the next thirty years, Jacobitism in Scotland continued largely due to the support the cause still attracted from key Highland clans. In 1745, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the eldest son of James VIII and grandson of James VII and II, landed in the Outer Hebrides with an army of 2,500 men. He took Edinburgh, and thus Scotland, within a week. In November 1745, Charles and the Jacobite forces of 5,500 crossed the border to England, with the odds of victory over the Hanoverian forces increasingly against them.

The defeat of the Jacobites in April 1746 at the Battle of Culloden is remembered, like Glencoe, as an example of Highland heroism against the oppressive English forces. The battle was a decisive victory for the Hanoverian forces, and ended the Jacobite uprising. Charles' men were outnumbered, and one fifth were not at the battlefield when the battle began. The flat terrain of Culloden Moor created an ideal battlefield for the Hanoverian infantry regiment to successfully destroy the Jacobites. In the face of such odds, the Jacobites did not disintegrate. Many survivors, and those who had not arrived in time for Culloden, later regrouped at Ruthven, in Badendoch, to attempt to continue fighting. It was actions like this which added to the legend of the brave Highlander, and also motivated the leader of the crown's forces, the Duke of Cumberland, to adopt a 'scorched earth policy' of burning, pillage and clearance of the clans who had supported the rebellion. Even clans who had been loyal to the Crown were razed in this year long attack.

¹⁸ T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: A History 1700-2000* (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 37.

With the Jacobites defeated, and any threat of a Stuart counter-revolution removed, the Lowlanders began to romanticise the idea of the brave Highlander. Whereas previously there had been a long history of anti-Highland satire from the Lowlanders¹⁹ and a view that the Highland rebels were traitors, in the wake of the events of ‘the forty five’ they were recast as ‘tragic, sentimental heroes representing a lost cause’²⁰ and ‘national heroes’.²¹ The kilt, and other Highland fashions, became popular with the Lowlanders, despite the 1746 Disarming Act which forbid the wearing of Highland clothes outside the military.²² John Macpherson’s publication of poems by the ancient Celtic poet, Ossian, in the 1760s, also added to the increasing fashionability of all things Highland, although the authenticity of these poems was dubious. This ‘Highlandisation’ of Scottish identity was cemented by Sir Walter Scott, and his stage managed production of (largely invented) Highland culture, put on for the 1822 visit of George IV to Edinburgh. Scott, himself a Lowlander, was the first President of the ‘Celtic Society of Edinburgh’, a society whose aim was to promote the ‘general use of the ancient Highland dress.’²³ Highland chiefs were encouraged to present themselves to the King in fitting attire. Enterprising manufacturers saw a ready market for expanding the range of tartan available, and under the authority of the Celtic Society, the newly created different tartans were certified as being the ‘tartan of Clan Mackenzie’ or ‘Clan MacDougall’. Scott continued to excite interest in Highland culture through his published works, such as *Waverley* (1814), and thus he helped bring ‘Highlandisation’ to the world.

¹⁹ Devine, p. 232.

²⁰ Michael Vance, ‘Powerful Pathos: The Triumph of Scottishness in Nova Scotia’ in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 156-179 (p.160).

²¹ Devine, p. 237

²² Hugh Trevor-Roper points out that the modern kilt was in fact invented in the early 18th century by ‘an English Quaker from Lancashire, Thomas Rawlinson.’ Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.15-41 (p. 21).

²³ Trevor-Roper, p. 29

The ‘Highlandisation’ image which Scott, Macpherson and others helped to create of the proud, fallen heroes, was later built on in the self-imaging of descendants of Highlanders who left Scotland as a result of the land clearances. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the restructuring of the Highland pastoral economy meant that many Highlanders were evicted from the land they had been leasing from their landlords, in what is referred to as the land clearances or ‘The Clearances’²⁴. The tenants were often replaced by sheep, which were less needy and had a ‘better attitude to property’ than their human counterparts.²⁵ The land clearances saw Highlanders leave the land in huge numbers, and precipitated a time of overcrowding, poverty and famine. But the land clearances were not the sole motivator for Highlanders to leave the Highlands. Many desired to move to areas which would give them a life that they would never have had as tenants in the Highlands; a life of land-owning and greater autonomy. Many emigrants would have viewed their departure from the Highlands, and equally the Lowlands, as leaving for new adventures rather than forcibly under exile. Regardless of historical accuracy, the land clearances have become such a ‘powerful weapon’²⁶ in the construction of identity for the Scottish emigrant community, that this narrative of an ‘exiled people’ has been taken on, internalised and become central to a modern understanding of what it means to be descended from the Highland Scots.²⁷ Descendants of emigrants and commentators have ‘conflated arbitrary 19th century evictions with the very different estate policies of the 18th century, portraying the whole history of the Highland emigration as an uninterrupted tragedy of brutal eviction and wholesale clearance.’²⁸ The failure of the Jacobite rebellion, and the land clearances, although separate events with a reasonable chronological gap

²⁴ Current thinking on the land clearances has moved away from referring to them as ‘The Clearances’ as an all encompassing term, and moved towards acknowledging that there were land clearances of both Highlands and Lowlands, which took place at varying levels of intensity over the 18th and 19th century. I would like to acknowledge informal discussions with Michael Vance (St. Mary’s University, Halifax) and Edward Cowan (University of Glasgow) on this issue.

²⁵ Robert Bothwell, *The Penguin History of Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006), p. 163.

²⁶ Marjory Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books, 2003), p. 333.

²⁷ Paul Basu, ‘Pilgrims to the Far Country: North American Roots-Tourists in the Scottish Highlands and Islands’ in *Transatlantic Scots*, pp. 286-317 (p. 291).

²⁸ Harper, *Adventurers and Exiles*, p. 333.

between them, have been collapsed together to create the ‘exiled, victimised Highlander’, despite the huge historical inaccuracy which such selective remembering creates. This merging of history has helped to form the myth of the ‘sentimentalised we-wuz-robbed...Scottish self-image which continues to this day.’²⁹

Push and Pull: Migration to Nova Scotia

*‘For immigrants, the need to resist the dominant culture...may be made heavier by distance and time, by memory, by a sense of exile or simple nostalgia.’*³⁰

The beginning of Scottish migration to Nova Scotia is seen, at least in popular perception, as commencing in 1773. A cargo ship, the *Hector*, arrived on Nova Scotia shores on the 15th September 1773, with 189 Scottish passengers - most from the Highlands. The decision to emigrate usually comes down to a twofold ‘push’ to move away from an undesirable situation in the home country, and ‘pull’ of a lure of a better life in the new country. The land clearances are an easy-to-cite reason as to what may have provided the ‘push’ for the Scottish emigrants to leave. Whilst the land clearances undoubtedly provided a good motivation for leaving, to label this as the only, or even main reason behind Scottish migration to Nova Scotia is a disservice to the almost two hundred years of history which is being considered. As previously stated, many Scots chose to leave voluntarily, and their reasoning was not solely down to the land clearances. The lure, or ‘pull’ of Canada should not be overlooked. From the 18th century onwards, immigrants were drawn to Nova Scotia because of the positive reports they heard through letters from loved ones who were already there. Later into the 19th century, Canadian recruiting companies, who set up offices in the main cities of Scotland, continued this publicity

²⁹ Murray Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and Scottish Identity: 1638 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 101.

³⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 51.

drive to lure the hearty Scottish folk to Canada.³¹ Many of those who boarded the cargo ships for a new life in Nova Scotia were farmers, farmer labourers, semi-skilled craftsmen and skilled traders.³² Conditions on the boats were cramped, and often unsanitary. By the 1840s, New Zealand, Australia and, to a smaller degree, South Africa, had opened up as other destinations for those wanting to leave Scotland, and the period of heavy Scottish immigration to Nova Scotia was over. Scottish immigration to Nova Scotia continued in decreasing numbers into the early 20th century.

The Scots who came to Nova Scotia ‘filled the eastern counties, most notably Pictou and Antigonish and spilled into Cape Breton (Island), which at the time of their arrival was largely uninhabited.’³³ The isolation of Cape Breton Island meant that the Scottish customs and language brought by the emigrants were preserved there for longer than in the mainland settlements such as Pictou and Antigonish, where greater interaction between different cultural groups occurred. Alistair MacLeod is of the first generation of Cape Breton Islanders not to have Gaelic as their mother tongue, ‘We didn’t melt with anybody because there wasn’t anybody to melt into or melt with.’³⁴ The isolated nature of Cape Breton is an important concern in MacLeod’s writing. This isolation was eased, at least physically, by the construction of the Canso Causeway, opened in 1955, which connects the island to the mainland.

Tartanisation: Re-writing History

³¹ Marjory Harper, ‘Exiles or Entrepreneurs: Snapshots of the Scots in Canada’ in *A Kingdom of the Mind: How the Scots Helped Make Canada Great*, ed. by Peter E. Rider and Heather McNabb (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), pp. 22-39 (pp. 24-27).

³² David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 615.

³³ Alistair MacLeod, ‘Inverness County: From Highland to Highland and Island to Island’, *Mabou Pioneers: Volume II* (Mabou: Mabou Historical Society, 1977), pp. 8-16 (p. 9).

³⁴ Alistair MacLeod, qtd. in ‘Play Traces The Stormy Past of A Cape Breton Clan’, *Vancouver Sun*, 13th April 2006
<<http://www.canada.com/vancouvernews/westcoastlife/story.html?id=5ec57110-98b5-4af2-be8e-9232d6b53b2c>> [accessed 22 October 2010].

*'The Scot in Canada, at least to some extent, is a Scot by choice. He or she has to push a button or strike a key in order to become Scottish.'*³⁵

There is no doubting that the Scots came to Nova Scotia, and in large numbers. They brought with them their language, their customs, beliefs and culture. But by the early 20th century, Nova Scotia was home to emigrants from Ireland, England, America, France, Holland, and Germany, as well as African-American emigrants, and the Mi'Kmaq people. The 1921 census recorded that the 148,000 Nova Scotians of Scottish descent (21% of the total population) were outnumbered by the 202,106 Nova Scotians of 'English origin', who constituted 39% of the total population.³⁶ In the light of a province with such a mix of ethnicities, why is modern Nova Scotia associated so strongly with Scotland?

In the mid 1930s, the Premier of Nova Scotia, Angus L. Macdonald, led a rebranding campaign of the province in order to attract more of the \$5 billion American tourist industry to the area. Nova Scotia at this time was probably not somewhere which would have been high on any tourist's list of relaxing destinations. The province was dominated by mining, forestry, and fishing. By the mid 19th century, Nova Scotia was a significant player in the world's shipping and mining industries, and home to the largest mines in British North America.³⁷ But by the 1920s, the coalfields were disrupted by layoffs, labour laws, and many of the resource industries were entering a period of decline. The economy worsened with the start of the Great Depression.

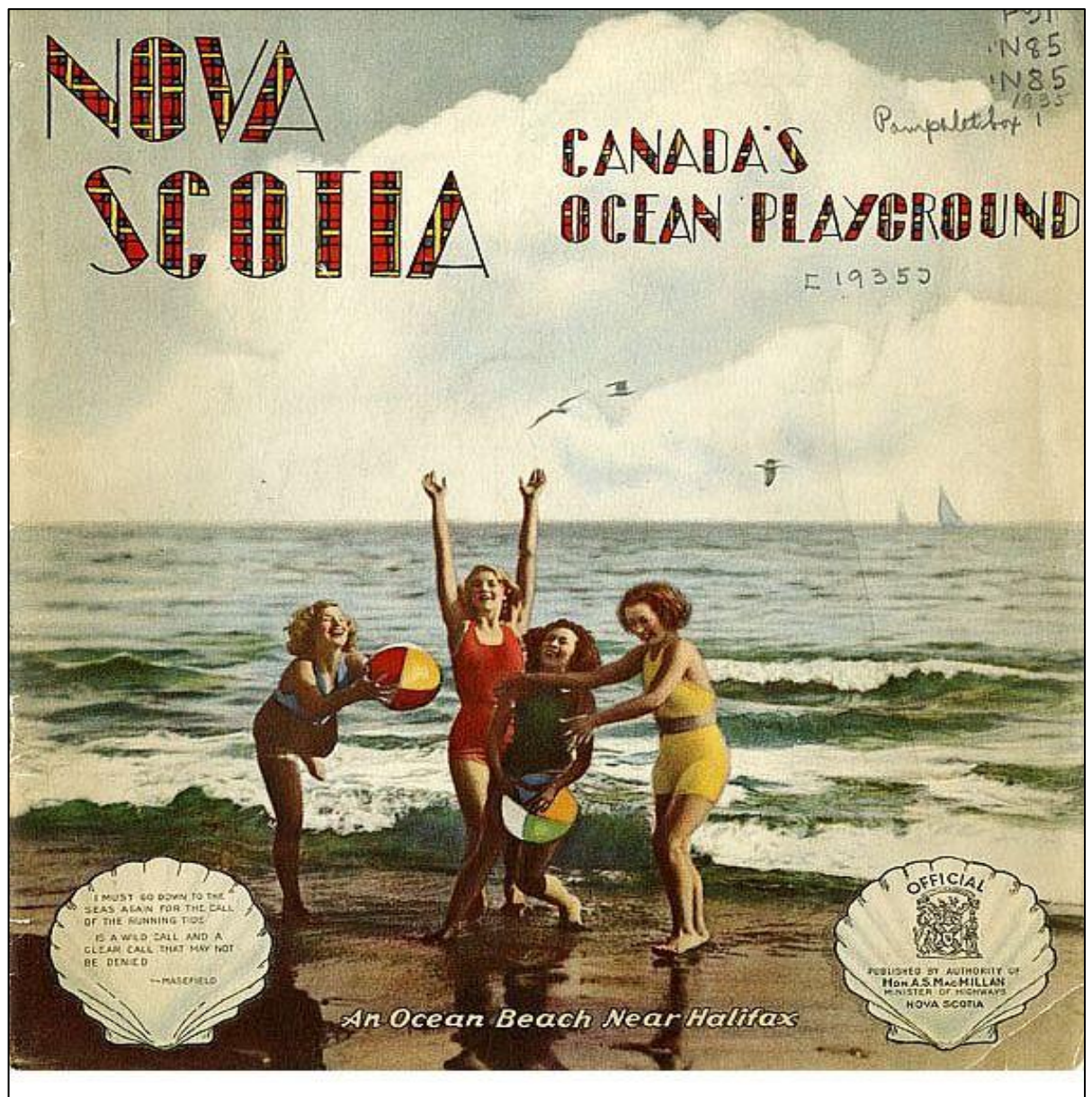
³⁵ J. M. Burnsted, 'Scottishness and Britishness in Canada', in *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory: Scotia and Nova Scotia, c 1700-1900*, ed. by Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance (Halifax: Fernswood Publishing, 1999), pp. 89-104 (p. 97).

³⁶ Ian McKay, 'Tartanisation Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954', *Acadiensis* 21.2 (1992), pp. 5-47 (p. 8).

³⁷ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernisation and Cultural Section in 20th Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), p. 26.

Angus L. MacDonald, himself a keen Scottish enthusiast, decided to rebrand Nova Scotia not just as a fantastic holiday destination (*Nova Scotia: Canada's Ocean Playground*) but also as the 'New Scotland' of North America. The province's name was an obvious bonus to this rebranding; and previously long forgotten 17th century 'Scottish' emblems were pulled out once again and used to promote the province, such as the coat of arms and flag, and later (in 1953) a Nova Scotia tartan was produced. The province was not only reinvented as solely 'Scottish', but was also given a preindustrial make-over. All the publicity and propaganda for Nova Scotia, and especially Cape Breton Island, presented it as a place of unspoilt innocence, a place untouched by industrialisation where the well-meaning inhabitants lived a simple life off the land. This was a land of 'folk', where men fished and raised livestock, while the women spun yarn. This highly inaccurate imagining of the 'heritage' of Nova Scotia was constructed through a collection of 'decontextualised artefacts, old ballads, sayings, superstitions, customs, and handicrafts, whose value lay in their status as isolated relics of *an older and better time*'.³⁸

³⁸ McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, p. 22.



An example of the tourism literature which was produced from the 1930s onwards. This brochure, from 1935, promotes the 'ocean playground' by showing sea-side goers enjoying a sunny afternoon at the beach. The tartan pattern on the heading includes the Scottish connection.

Image courtesy of Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, NS.



This image, taken from a brochure promoting rail travel in Nova Scotia, shows the 'folk image' which was associated with the province. The quaint frieze of fruit, the woman's costuming and the spinning wheel all suggest the pre-industrial, unspoiled paradise which Nova Scotia was promoted as being.

Image courtesy of Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, NS.

The ‘tartanisation’ of modern Nova Scotia is similar to the ‘Highlandisation’ of Scotland in the 19th century. In both cases, a place and a people were reinvented so that the previously negative connotations were removed, and a new sentimental image, focusing on a ‘time gone by’ was encouraged. The ‘folk’ Scottish image of 20th century Nova Scotia stands apart from the wider self-imagining by Scottish-Canadian emigrants, which focuses more on the ‘hardy exiles of the Clearances’ notion. This is not to say that this ‘exiles’ image is without sentimentality. As Marjory Harper points out ‘it is possible that Scots in Canada, deliberately or subconsciously, filtered out images of home that did not fit the picture they wanted to create’.³⁹ The result of this selective remembering of Scotland is that the emigrants pass on to their descendents a highly romanticised view of the place they left. Myths like the Highland hero or the stoic and brave emigrant become galvanised into what those of Scottish descent understand their heritage to be. Myth becomes fact. Scotland, the nation, becomes ‘Scotland’, a place of the past which those of Scottish descendant look to as a means of anchoring their own identity. How is this ‘Empire of the Mind’ created, and why do the 20th century characters in MacLeod’s work continue to perpetuate such a myth? It is these questions which underpin the discussion in Chapter One.

³⁹ Marjory Harper, ‘Exiles or Entrepreneurs’, p. 36.

Chapter One - A Kingdom of The Mind: *Scotland*

‘A Scottish born Scot is only of secondary standing and importance in the world in comparison with the Cape Breton Scot.’¹

‘People who lose their nationality create a legend to take its place.’²

Edwin Muir

In ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’, the central character asks: ‘What is the significance of ancestral islands, long left and never seen? Blown over now by the Atlantic winds?’ (160) What meaning does Scotland have for those Cape Breton Scots who MacLeod writes of, whose ancestry is Scottish, yet whose recent history and present concerns are very definitely grounded in 20th century Cape Breton Island? Scotland is constructed by MacLeod as a fantastical island of the past, which represents cultural preservation and sanctuary. MacLeod’s characters often demonstrate a desire to almost journey back into this mythical place of their past. As things in the present begin to crumple for MacLeod’s characters, they increasingly fall back into their Scottish past as a means of seeking solace. The narrator of ‘Rankin’ says: ‘I feel myself falling back into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future’ (176). Scotland, even Glasgow in the late 1990s, becomes a portal to a nostalgic past, which MacLeod’s characters turn their gaze to, rather than face their uncertain future.

¹ T.C. Davis, High Commissioner for Canada to Australia, to Angus L. MacDonald, Premier of Nova Scotia, 30 May 1944. MacDonald Papers, MG 2. Vol. 1517 Fol. 718, Public Archives Nova Scotia .

² Edwin Muir, qtd. in Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In The Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996), p. 105.

This chapter explores the ways in which ‘Scotttishness’ has been incorporated in the cultural identity of MacLeod’s characters. The myth of the brave Highland warrior is crucial to the Cape Breton Scots’ understanding of their ancestry, and the discussions between the two grandfathers of *No Great Mischief* illustrate the opposing attitudes to such a construction: reason and rationality versus sentimentality and romanticism. The legacy of being descendents of Scottish emigrants is also considered, as the dual narratives of ‘Highland Warrior’ and ‘exiled Emigrant’ are merged in the Islanders’ understanding of their ancestors. The image of the ‘red headed Highlander’, who appears in several forms in *No Great Mischief* is a symbol of the characters’ link to their past, but the distortion of the latest incarnation calls into question the relevance of such a motif in modern society. The people of Cape Breton are themselves doubly exiled, as they increasingly migrate from the Island to other parts of the world, and so Scotland, as the symbol of an unseen ideal ‘homeland’, takes on heightened importance. MacLeod’s depiction of modern Scotland and its people is of a place in the past, which has remained unchanged since the ancestors of the Cape Breton Scots departed in the late 18th century.

‘Loyal as hell’

‘History’ becomes ‘myth’ when the bones of a story are fleshed out with romance and intrigue and ordinary men become heroes and villains. Myth-creation requires those who perpetuate the myth to suspend their disbelief and ignore factual accuracy; or, put simply, myths speak to our hearts and ask us to ignore our heads. Myth can also be ‘an essential construction which people feel compelled to devise for themselves for the sake of self-preservation’.³ The myth of the ‘brave Highland Scot’ is one which MacLeod draws on, and presents as important to his characters’ understanding of Scotland, but he also asks his readers to consider what it is about this ‘essential construction’ which makes it

³ Edward J. Cowan, ‘The Myth of Scotch Canada’, in *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory*, eds. Harper and Vance, pp. 49-72 (p. 56).

something the Cape Breton Islanders feel is necessary for the self-preservation of their identity. The two grandfathers of *No Great Mischief* each take opposing stances on this myth, as they discuss key battles in which the MacDonald clan fought. Grandpa, the bawdy comedian who dies ‘from jumping up in the air and trying to click his heels together twice’ (NGM 245), believes whole-heartedly in the romanticised view of the brave Highlanders. Grandfather, a man of few, but sage, words whose face ‘would redden at almost any sexual reference’ (NGM 31), sees the events of the battles very differently. He is the voice of realism and through his insistence on the tough realities of such battles, he argues against the myth of brave Highlanders who became the emigrants to Cape Breton. In a discussion about one of the first battles of the Jacobite rebellion, Grandfather says:

...‘When the MacDonalds came back from the Battle of Killiecrankie...their barley and oats had ripened, and they were already late for the season’s harvest.’

‘But they had won,’ said Grandpa.

‘Yes, they had won’ said Grandfather. ‘They had won the battle in the old way, but they had also lost a lot.’

‘Loyal as hell’ said Grandpa appreciatively.

‘Yes, loyal to a cause which was becoming daily more muddled and which was to cost them dearly in the end.’

‘They were brave as hell,’ said Grandpa with enthusiasm.

‘Yes, but I think they were also afraid.’

‘Never,’ said Grandpa, half raising tipsily from his chair, as if he would defend the honour of all MacDonalds in the world. ‘Never was a MacDonald afraid.’

(NGM 82-83)

The short sentences and use of similes make Grandpa's argument for the myth a series of emotive retorts. He focuses on the positive aspects of the Highlanders, that 'they had won' and were 'loyal as hell', and illustrates a desire to see the men as Ajax or Hercules, rather than flawed humans. In contrast, Grandfather encourages Grandpa to see the reality behind the myth. Grandfather argues that these young men were 'afraid', had 'lost a lot', and were possibly misguided in their loyalty to a 'muddled cause'.

In a later conversation, the men debate the Scottish Highlander troops' role in the Battle on the Plains of Abraham against the French, in which they were under the command of the British General, James Wolfe. The men discuss how the Highlanders were first up the cliff. Grandfather says:

'Yes...*first up the cliff*. Wolfe was still below in the boat. Think about it.'

'They were first because they were the best, said Grandpa stoutly. 'I think of them as winning Canada for us. They learned that at Culloden.'

'At Culloden they were on the other side.' Said Grandpa in near exasperation.

'MacDonald fought against Wolfe.'(NGM 101)

In these talks, Grandfather becomes MacLeod's voice against the myth. He highlights the historical facts which are overlooked when *Highlander* becomes *Emigrant* becomes *Heroic Soldier* fighting 'for Canada', as several hundred years of history are collapsed into one red-haired, kilt-wearing ideal. Grandfather attempts to separate the merged myths of Jacobite warriors and Wolfe's soldiers. He emphasises that what Grandpa interprets as bravery, that the Scots at Abraham were 'first up the cliff', is actually a sign of the Scots' political expendability. Grandpa's argument remains undeterred and he continues to draw on the positive aspects of the battle: 'the best', 'winning', 'for us'.

Unlike Grandpa, Grandfather is able to find his sense of ‘Cape Breton Scot’ identity through knowledge and learning. He ‘knew all the verses (of the traditional Gaelic songs) in his head and never made a mistake’ (NGM 251). The battles of his forefathers make interesting, intellectual reading, but he is able to distinguish fact from fiction. In contrast, Grandpa’s identity is shaped, in part, by being the distant son of a Highland warrior, who was ‘loyal as hell’. The stories as he knows them are ‘true’ because they are real to him, and he has sown them into his own identity. The juxtaposition of the ‘head’ and the ‘heart’ allows MacLeod to illustrate the power which these founding myths have, whilst acknowledging the historical inaccuracies on which the myths rest.

Wounded Warriors

MacLeod writes in the ‘tradition of bardic poets’,⁴ especially in the construction of *No Great Mischief*. Like Homer telling the Odyssey, MacLeod fills his novel with formulaic epithets, recurring motifs and repeated phrases and stories. The figure of the ‘red haired warrior character’ appears in several guises, including *Calum Ruadh* and the original MacDonald patriarch Mac Ian, and Calum MacDonald, brother of protagonist Alexander. MacLeod draws on historical fact in creating ‘Mac Ian’, of the MacDonald clan who were murdered at Glencoe in 1692.⁵ Mac Ian epitomises the ‘Highland warrior’ persona both physically, ‘a tall and gigantic leader’ (NGM 89) and in his hospitable manner. Mc Ian ‘fed and sheltered...the government troops for two weeks’ only to have some of the troops raise him from his bed at dawn and give him a ‘bullet smashed into the back of his head’ (NGM 88). The murdering government troops become savages and sexual predators, who ‘set upon the wife’ of the slaughtered host, and ‘gnawed the rings from

⁴ Gwendolyn Davies, ‘Alistair MacLeod and Gaelic Diaspora’, in *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Post-Colonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context*, Marta Dvorak and W. H. New (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), pp. 121-138 (p. 128).

⁵ Members of the MacDonald clan were killed at the Massacre of Glencoe, 1692. ‘Massacre of Glencoe.’ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. <<http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/EBchecked/topic/235254/Massacre-of-Glencoe>> [accessed 28th April 2011].

her fingers with their teeth' (NGM 89). Against such barbaric behaviour, Mac Ian is the fallen Highland hero, defeated by forces beyond his control, with his 'once red hair...reverting suddenly back to the even brighter redness of his blood' (NGM 89).

The violence and blood which marks the death of Mac Ian defines the life of his descendant, Calum MacDonald, who is another reincarnation of the 'Highland Warrior'. Calum is first introduced as having a 'gash above his left eyebrow' (NGM 7) with blood still flowing, and throughout his life he resolves conflict with violence. An altercation with the police leaves Calum with 'clots and scales of blackened dried blood lay[ing] caked and matted in his hair' (NGM 115). His fight with Fern Picard, leader of the Québécois miners, leaves Fern dead and Calum in prison for manslaughter. Calum has the strength and physicality which is characteristic of the 'Highland Warrior' archetype, but seems lost in the modern 20th century society in which his brother Alexander fits comfortably. He, like Mac Ian, is a 'self-reliant man who was over taken by his own history'(NGM 245). Calum is defined by his ancestral inheritance of physical violence and headstrong self-determination, but in the 20th century such qualities are detrimental. When he is charged with Fern Picard's death, Calum illustrates this independence by refusing a lawyer, saying 'I've been looking after myself since I was sixteen years old...I can handle this' (NGM 239). Such pride may have aided Highlander leaders like Mc Ian, but in a courtroom in Canada, circa 1980s, it counts against Calum.

The brutish, violent side of Calum's 'Highland Warrior' construction likens him to Archie MacNeil, the Cape Breton 'Highlander' of Hugh MacLennan's *Each Man's Son*. MacLennan's depiction of the Cape Breton Scots is much less sympathetic than MacLeod's characterisation, and Archie is defined by his thuggish strength (he is a boxer)

and limited intellect. Archie becomes a hero to his fellow miners because, through boxing, he is able to act out some of the 'Warrior' instincts which they themselves have inherited.

...to the men of Broughton, Archie was a hero. When he had an exhibition before going away, six thousand Highlanders – men who have been driven from the outdoors into pits where physical courage had become almost the only virtue they could see clearly and see all the time – paid to watch him fight. They loved him because he was giving significance, even a crude beauty, to the clumsy courage they all felt in themselves.⁶

Archie becomes a folk hero to the miners, but upon returning to his Cape Breton town after several years away, he is reduced to a monster who kills his wife and her lover in a jealous rage, before dying of a 'clot on the brain'.⁷ Like Calum, Archie's violent tendencies cause him to become a criminal in a society for which he is ill suited. Both men's sensibilities make them better suited for the battlefields of Glencoe, and their violent acts and subsequent death and imprisonment 'reinvokes the archetype of the wandering Highland warrior finally destroyed by uncontrollable forces.'⁸

Calum 'lives the maxims of the *clann*'⁹ and is governed by his loyalty to his family rather than the laws and social norms of the 20th century Canadian society in which he lives. As a man who fits culturally into a place of the past, he becomes 'a metaphor for the dislocation and the cultural degeneration of the Diaspora experience'.¹⁰ He is on the outside of society in the country of his birth (he never marries, he spends much of his adult life in prison and ends his days in a half-way house), yet he is not 'Scottish'.

⁶ Hugh MacLennan, *Each Man's Son* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), p.20.

⁷ MacLennan, p. 279.

⁸ Vasil, p. 13.

⁹ Sharon Selby, 'Of Blood and Bone: Myth and Memory in the Imagining of Scottish-Canadian Identity,' presented at *Canada As A Refuge? Centre of Canadian Studies 31st International Conference* 1st -2nd May 2008, 1-10 (p.3).

¹⁰ Charlotte Farlie, 'Hastily Departed Brothers': Saving the Lost Son in *A River Runs Through It, Highland River* and *No Great Mischief*, *Scottish Studies Review*, 9. 2 (2008), 145-158 (p. 153).

Although he has the spirit of the Highland Warrior, Calum does not have the red hair of the burly Highlander. It is the younger, and more academic, Alexander who has inherited the red hair of the Highland Warrior. The recessive red hair of the Celts is used in MacLeod's oeuvre to emphasis masculinity and strength. The brave 'much longed-for...golden older brother' (214) in 'To Everything There Is A Season', upon whose mining income the family relies, returns home from the Ontario mines triumphantly with 'his reddish hair and beard' and 'hearty laughter' (214). The grandfather of 'The Return', who symbolises rural physicality and masculinity, had 'once-red hair'(84). In *No Great Mischief*, to have red hair is to be from *Clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Only those of the clan have the distinctive combination of red hair and dark eyes ('No one looks like that' (NGM 27)). For better or worse, the red hair links the modern characters to their Scottish roots and the associations and stereotypes of Scottish people. When Calum leaves the courthouse after his hearing, someone in the crowd yells out: 'Look how many of them have red hair. They look like people who would be violent.' (NGM 239). Whereas Calum embraces the 'warrior' traits he has inherited, Alexander feels burdened by being the '*gille beag Ruadh*...little red boy' (NGM 16). Within the clan, he is referred to by this title, which strips him of some of his individual identity. As a child when he is asked 'Are you *gille beag ruadh*? He replies: 'no, I'm not. Alexander. I'm Alexander' (NGM 17). The 20th century version of the 'Highland Warrior' has been split between the two brothers, suggesting that the qualities which Calum has (physical strength and a desire to be entirely self-sufficient) are less important to the clan's future survival and success than the academic ability, quiet leadership and more developed social skills which Alexander has. As Calum does not have children and Alexander does, it is Alexander's strain of this archetypal mutation which will be passed on to the clan's next generation.

'The Children of Our Own Despair'

*'I don't know how long we can be saddled with Culloden, or with The Clearances, but...meditative, thoughtful people brought that kind of sadness with them.'*¹¹

Alistair MacLeod

The children in MacLeod's stories inherit not just their parents' physical and character traits, but also their views on their Scottish identity. The Cape Breton Scots are shaped by thinking of themselves as descendants of both the heroic warriors of Culloden and the victimised, but brave emigrants: the dual myths of the Scottish Diaspora. The sense of loss, exile and victimhood which is associated with these dual myths becomes an inherited ancestral grief. Each successive generation is made aware that they are 'probably what we are because of the '45. We are, ourselves, directly or indirectly, the children of the Culloden Moor and what happened in its aftermath' (NGM 192). The sadness of the first emigrants seeps through their family tree, so that the modern characters still see themselves as 'victims of history' (420). Although living in 20th century Canada, they are 'the children of our own despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree'(159). Scotland cannot fail to be an important aspect in the modern characters' identity when the defining event in their lives happened in there, over 300 years before they were born.

The Cape Breton Scots identity which MacLeod depicts is characterised by grief which seems to haunt successive generations, yet also a tendency towards self-reliance and mettle. This identity is created through intertwining the violence of the Jacobite era with the new beginnings of the immigrant experience. In the description of the original *Chalum Ruaidh* family, emigration is linguistically linked to Prince Charlie. When *Calum Ruadh*, then 21 years old, decided to support Charlie in the '45', he and other supporters were told 'Don't be fools...You're on the wrong side'(NGM 18). Likewise, when the

¹¹ Alistair MacLeod, qtd. in Nicholson, 'Signatures of Time', p. 197.

MacDonald clan announce their departure for Cape Breton, they are responding to calls from those who have already immigrated to North America, who have said ‘You’re on the wrong side’, ‘Don’t be fools.’ The violent politics that surround Bonnie Prince Charlie are repeatedly suggested as a motivation for the Scottish emigrants’ relocation to Cape Breton. The old man from Skye, in ‘The Tuning of Perfection’, built his new home in Cape Breton ‘on top of the mountain’ because ‘of the violence he had left in Scotland, he wanted to be inaccessible in the new world and wanted to be able to see any potential enemies before they could see him’ (272). Such linguistic links and allusions paint the Scotland left behind as a place of continual conflict, political unrest and hardship. The description of Calum and the clan’s eventual arrival and new life in Cape Breton supports the idea of stoicism and survival; ideas also strongly associated with the Scottish Diaspora. Although Calum suffers the loss of his wife, who dies onboard the emigration ship, and he feels saddled with the responsibility to support his large family, ‘he “set his teeth”, as they say, and resolved to carry on’ (NGM 22). The staunch Highlander becomes the pioneering Canadian.

The images MacLeod paints of the resilient emigrants and brave pioneers are, at times, highly romanticised. *Calum Ruadh* is seen ‘in imagination’s mist’ (NGM 19) ‘holding his violin’ as he departs a loved homeland, but looking forward to a new future with his ‘ill but hopeful wife’ (NGM19). In the poem ‘The Road to Rhu and *Cairn an’ Dorin* (The Cairn of Sorrow)¹² MacLeod thinks of those left behind in equally misty-eyed terms. The Scots who were forced to wave their emigrating loved ones off stand at a ‘vanished pier’, now ‘only a memory’, ‘where wail the / Vanished people’ ‘weeping and waving’ ‘leaning and yearning/ Toward each other.’ This sentimentalised emigrant poem, of the grief and despair of being torn away from a homeland and loved ones, skirts closely to the border of the kind of poets that Edward J. Cowan is thinking of when he writes of the

¹² Alistair MacLeod, ‘The Road to Rhu and *Cairn an’ Dorin* (The Cairn of Sorrow)’, *Antigonish Review*, 61.7 (1985), p. 61.

‘second or even third generation Scots who had never seen Scotland, but who nevertheless felt compelled to drone on, in Lallans, about an imagined homeland, a never never landscape of hills and grannes and hame’.¹³ Such poetic imagining can also be seen in descendents of Scots who emigrated to other lands, such as the poems of New Zealand Scot Jessie McKay, in particular ‘For the Love of Appin’¹⁴ and ‘The Ancient People’¹⁵. Cowan concludes that MacLeod’s work is spared from becoming overt nostalgia because Macleod applies the metaphor of the land clearances and forced emigration to the demise of the Cape Breton culture, thus MacLeod’s lyrical words may be of wailing and weepy Scots, but his grief is really for his own island.

The Unseen Kingdom

The correlations that MacLeod draws between Scotland and Cape Breton are apt. Both areas have experienced significant numbers of people emigrating due to economic necessity. Cape Breton Scots are a people who have a history of exile and migration and ‘there is a sense of repeated or duplicated exile in MacLeod’s work in which out-migration in Cape Breton speaks to the out-migrants’ ancestral history of separation and loss.’¹⁶ The effect of this ancestral memory of banishment is that as those in Cape Breton mourn the recent emigration of their own people, they increasingly idealise Scotland in their thinking of it as the original ‘homeland’. Scotland and Scottish emblems, such as Gaelic, music, folklore and icons like heather, become talismans which have the power to transport the characters to a country they have never seen; a kingdom in their minds. The yearning for this place of the past becomes stronger as the future of Cape Breton’s culture becomes less certain. As Calum of ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’ expresses it:

¹³ Cowan, pp. 63-64.

¹⁴ Jessie Mackay, ‘For the Love of Appin’, *Land of the Morning* (Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1909), p. 36.

¹⁵ MacKay, ‘The Ancient People’, p. 34.

¹⁶ Mary Frances Finnigan, ‘To Live Somewhere Else: Migration and Cultural Identity in Alistair MacLeod’s Fiction’ (unpublished masters thesis, St. Mary’s University: Halifax, 1995), p. 6.

‘Sometimes when seeing the end of our present, our past looms ever larger, because it is all we have or all we think we know’ (176).

This ‘kingdom’ the characters think of is ostensibly ‘Scotland’, but it is not a Scotland which still exists, nor really a Scotland of the past. The characters yearn for a place where the ‘Scottish’ traditions and customs which define their Cape Breton culture are celebrated and nurtured. But the nature of immigrant culture is that those elements of the home country which are transported to the new country and continued on are not necessarily representative of the original culture. Like the brooch the grandmother of ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’ wears, which has ‘falseness’ because ‘Scottish thistles do not twine’ (162) like the ones on the brooch, the ‘Scottish’ traditions of Cape Breton Island are interpretations rather than replicas. The characters long for an alternative Cape Breton, rather than any Scotland which ever has or will exist. The Mac an Amharius of ‘Visions’ spends his final days speaking of ‘the green island of Canna, which he literally had never seen’(361). He describes the ‘people riding their horses to Michaelmas’ and ‘carrying the bodies of their dead towards the sun’ (361). Although he names this unseen island as Canna of the Hebrides, what he is really ‘seeing’ is the fantasy island from which his own understanding of Scotland has descended. This fantasy island is very similar to the real Canna his Scottish ancestors left behind, but has morphed over time in the collective remembering of the emigrants and their descendents, as it has been constructed by the subjective memories of those who left the original Canna. Similarly, the aged ‘seanaichies’ (story-telling bards) in *No Great Mischief* would “‘remember’ events from Scotland they have never seen’(NGM 60) but somehow possessed within them as inherited knowledge. These selective memories and romanticised images create an artistic interpretation of how things may have been back in the homeland. The Mac laments that the people from Canna are ‘all gone from there; scattered all over the world’ (347). ‘Canna’ linguistically alludes to the biblical ‘Canaan’, another ‘promised land’ of

exiled peoples. Whilst he may be referring to ‘Canna’, the line is clearly just as relevant to the real Cape Breton on which the Mac resides.

In ‘Clearances’, the narrator, when faced with his ancestral land being bought up by tourists, turns to face the ‘invisible edge’(430) of Scotland, before stepping over a cliff. The tone is similar to Seamus Heaney’s 1975 poem ‘North’, in which the narrator finds the ‘secular/ powers of the Atlantic’ ocean wanting, and yearns for Thor and ‘those famous raiders’¹⁷ of Ireland’s Viking past to emerge from the past and rectify the present. But in ‘Clearances’, the desire of the narrator to step into this past, rather than call its strength to the present, is a further sign of the dying Cape Breton culture. It is the elderly and the dying, those on the cusp between life and death, who look to the invisible islands and kingdoms of their minds, thus the ‘Scotland’ of the Cape Breton Islanders’ mind becomes a mythical place that you can see only when you are passing from one life into the next.

‘In the Valley of Noncomprehension’

Linguistically, the Cape Breton Islanders are tied to Scotland through the Gaelic language. The language is seen as a means for creating kinship and strengthening communal and cultural bonds. Gaelic, as the historic first language of the Cape Breton Scots, is also sometimes seen as another burden for those who strive to move past the limited life offered in rural Cape Breton. There is a sense of sadness and regret from some of MacLeod’s 20th century Cape Breton characters that they can no longer speak solely Gaelic in the increasing English-centric society that they live in. The narrator of ‘Clearances’ remembers his grandfather trying to conduct a business transaction, in which the old man sent ‘Gaelic words out and (was) receiving English words back; most of the

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, ‘North’, in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966- 1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 100.

words falling somewhere in the valley of incomprehension which yawned between them' (418). By not speaking English, the isolation and separateness which is associated with MacLeod's Cape Breton Scots is emphasised, and the negative aspects of being in such a minority group are underlined. They sit, metaphorically, on the other side of a 'valley' to the rest of the population. MacLeod draws an analogy to the Québécois, but suggests that, unlike Québec's French-speakers, the Gaelic speakers did not 'have the luxury... to pretend they do not understand the 'other' language' (320). The Cape Breton Scots of the 20th century had little choice but to learn the dominant language and as a result Gaelic is increasingly perceived as outdated or irrelevant by the younger generation. The two young adults of 'The Tuning of Perfection', the thuggish Carver and the crass gum-chewing, truck-driving granddaughter, Sal, view the Gaelic language as 'a few stupid old songs' (305) and a 'bunch of nonsense syllables strung together' (303). Sal and Carver, as images of Cape Breton's future, paint a depressing picture. Their derogatory and disinterested attitude towards Gaelic, and thus their own heritage, highlights the importance of language in the understanding and appreciation for a culture.

For those characters who do continue to speak Gaelic, it serves as a vital tool for fostering a sense of kinship and belonging. Gaelic language is 'frequently associated with feelings of home and safety'¹⁸ and the language provides comfort to its speakers in times of great distress. The miner-protagonist in 'The Closing Down of Summer' describes how it was only once he began to work in the 'isolation of the shafts' that 'Gaelic began to bubble inside of him' (194). He and his fellow miners spoke Gaelic underground because it is so 'constant and familiar and unchanging' and 'speaks to us as the privately familiar' (194). It is Gaelic that the scared young men of 'Visions' whisper to each other when they are in a Halifax army recruitment station, because they are 'far from home and more

¹⁸ Kirsten Sandrock, 'Scottish Territories and Canadian Identity: Regional Aspects in the Literature of Alistair MacLeod', in *Translation of Cultures*, ed. by Petra Rudiger and Konrad Gross (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 149-168 (p. 173).

lonely and frightened than they cared to admit' (332). Likewise, when the soldier of 'Clearances' comes under German fire and believes he may die, he prays in Gaelic because it was more 'reflexively natural' than English, and he 'felt he could make himself more clearly understood to God in the prayers of his earliest language' (418). The language is also used to create a linguistic cloak of privacy and unity. When the *Chalum Ruaidh* miners are working in the mines, the different languages which surround the men become like 'territorial markers'¹⁹ used by the different cultural groups to stake out their sense of identity. They speak in Gaelic as a way of communicating privately, and the language is of heightened importance. Speaking what 'we perceived as our own language', they were able to feel their 'lives more intensely' (NGM127). Gaelic is the language of the soul and heart of the Cape Breton Scots, and offers a linguistic shelter for them, which links them back to their ancestral origins.

MacLeod's characters also use Gaelic as their medium for emotional communication. The important stories of the family in 'Vision' are 'told in Gaelic, and as people say 'It is not the same in English', although the images are true' (359). English is able to convey the factual elements of the stories, but not the soul and sentiment. Gaelic was the 'language of their courting days' (NGM 36) for both Grandpa and Grandma of *No Great Mischief*, and their contemporary Archibald, of 'The Tuning of Perfection' and his wife, who sing to each other in Gaelic when they are young. Gaelic music is almost another language in itself. As MacLeod notes: 'The most enduring aspect of the (Gaelic) culture...is retained in its music.'²⁰ Gaelic laments and ballads are passed down through the generations, and to know the lyrics to the songs is to be able to participate in a cultural tradition and form of shared remembrance. Calum and Alexander in *No Great Mischief*, whose lives have gone in very different paths, are able to communicate their love and

¹⁹ Claire Omhòvère, 'Roots and Routes in a Selection of Stories by Alistair Macleod', in *Tropes and Territories*, pp. 271- 290 (p. 274).

²⁰ MacLeod, 'Inverness County', p. 11.

brotherhood through singing a Gaelic lament, and when they sing together 'it is as if there is no break between his ending and my beginning' (NGM 14).

Gaelic is seen as something inbuilt in MacLeod's characters. More than a language, it is part of their identity, like a kind of cultural DNA. Alexander and Catriona refer to Gaelic as being the 'language of their hearts'(NGM 178) and cite a passage in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, about a Canadian woman of Scottish descent, in which protagonist Morag says: 'The lost languages, forever lurking somewhere in the ventricles of the hearts of those who have lost them.'²¹ Language is a life-force for a culture, and to lose the language is for the heart-beat of that culture's identity to stop. Gaelic 'lurks' within all those of Scottish descent, regardless of whether they are able to converse in the language. This understanding of the importance of the language is another aspect of the characters' inherited culture, like the ancestral loss passed down from being emigrants' descendents and thus 'children of despair', and the Highland Warrior traits which Calum and Alexander each exhibit. The link to the heart underscores that Gaelic is spoken with soul and spirit, more than words. When Alexander states that to be an orthodontist is to be 'beyond language'(NGM 178) he means that it is an occupation which is seen as soulless and superficial, and lacking in any real historical grounding or cultural significance.

The dilemma of MacLeod's work is that by writing in English about the passing of Scottish culture in Cape Breton and its Gaelic language at a time where the historical relevance of Scotland in Nova Scotia is beginning to slip, he is, at one and the same time, both recording and mourning the loss and also contributing to it. Colin Nicholson calls

²¹ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 244.

this paradox ‘enacting that moment of slippage’.²² MacLeod rarely uses Gaelic phrases without translation and contextualisation, so as not to alienate the non-Gaelic speaking readers. One of the areas which Gaelic is used most is when Cape Breton characters travel to Scotland. In such episodes, the character’s knowledge of Gaelic is key to their sense of ‘coming home’ in a country they have previously only heard about in stories.

The Foreigner at ‘Home’

*‘For our kind of people, Scotland is the place you go back to and the Canadian West is the place you go forward to.’*²³ Alistair MacLeod

In ‘Pilgrims to the Far Country: North American Roots-Tourists in the Scottish Highlands and Islands’ Paul Basu describes a trend towards ‘roots tourism’, in which tourists of Scottish descent travel to Scotland to ‘discover’ their roots and ‘see’ their home country. Basu even notes that the Scottish Executive have identified this kind of tourism as a commercially important ‘niche market.’²⁴ These tourists come to Scotland expecting to find it as they have long believed it to be; a place of tragic-comedic shepherds, wailing land tenants and the odd Braveheart warrior charging around the countryside. They may have little interest in seeing Scotland as the modern, vibrant country that it is today. It is not so much wilful ignorance which creates this false image of modern Scotland, but rather a symptom of what the home of origin symbolises to the descendants of emigrants. People remember a place as they left it, thus the emigrants pass on to their children and grandchildren stories of the Scotland they knew. Over the decades and centuries, ‘Scotland’, for those of Scottish descent, has become a place of the imagination; a synonym for ‘the past’. MacLeod’s depiction of modern Scotland is in keeping with this

²² Nicholson, ‘Signatures of Time’, p. 98.

²³ Alistair MacLeod, qtd. in ‘Alistair MacLeod Interview’, in *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers In Interview*, ed. by Andrew Garrod (St Johns, NL: Breakwater, 1986), pp. 155- 171 (p. 158).

²⁴ Paul Basu, ‘Pilgrims to the Far Country: North American Roots-Tourists in the Scottish Highlands and Islands’ in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray, pp. 286-317 (p. 288).

diasporic tendency, as he writes of a place seemingly unaltered since the last emigrant boat left for the New World.

There are three extended passages in MacLeod's work in which a Nova Scotia character visits modern Scotland.²⁵ In each of the 'Scotland' episodes, a Cape Breton character goes to Scotland to either find their ancestral past, or escape their present lives. In 'Clearances', a soldier 'armed with scraps of paper bearing place names and addresses' (418) goes north west from Glasgow, to seek out the village of his ancestors. Likewise, in *No Great Mischief*, Catriona, the sister of narrator Alexander, is visiting Aberdeen with her husband, and feels drawn to hire a car and drive to the 'rough bounds' of Moidart (NGM 147). In a separate episode in *No Great Mischief*, Catriona's unnamed brother (by inference a MacDonald) goes to Glasgow for a new beginning, after the arrest and imprisonment of Calum.

The Cape Breton characters interact with a Scottish character, who assumes that they are also Scottish. Upon arriving at Glasgow's Queen Street station, MacDonald is approached by a stranger who greets him with the Gaelic greeting '*Ciamar a tha sibh?*' (How are you?), to which MacDonald replies '*Cle mhath*' (NGM 243). This Gaelic greeting is also used to begin the interaction between visiting Canadian and 'real' Scotsman in 'Clearances'. As the soldier travels by train further north towards the Highlands, and the 'soft language' of Gaelic '[begins] to dominate'(419), he strikes up a conversation with a Highland shepherd. The soldier knows that the shepherd speaks Gaelic, because he has heard the shepherd speaking to his dog in Gaelic. The soldier 'haltingly' initiates a conversation with the shepherd by asking '*Ciamar a tha sibh?*' (How are you?) (419). Similarly when Catriona is introduced to an elderly old man she meets

²⁵ There is a very short fourth reference to a Cape Breton character going to Scotland. In 'As Birds Bring Forth The Sun', one of the descendants of the original farmer is killed in a Glasgow bar fight.

north of Moidart, he asks her which clan she is from, ‘*Co tha seo?*’, to which she replies ‘*Clann Chalum Ruaidh*’ (NGM 148). Catriona’s knowledge of Gaelic is the acid test as to whether she is really of the clan of *Calum Ruadh*. Earlier in her Moidart visit, Catriona has been identified by one of the local women as being ‘from here’ (NGM 417). When she states she is from Canada, the woman responds ‘But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while’ (NGM 147). This sense that the visiting Canadians are local is also seen in MacDonald at the Glasgow train station. The Highlander he is speaking with says ‘I’m waiting for the train to the Highlands. I suppose you are too’ (NGM 242); an assumption based on MacDonald’s knowledge of Gaelic. The shepherd of ‘Clearances’ also assumes that the visiting Canadian must be a local and he interacts with the soldier with ease in Gaelic until he notices the soldier’s uniform, ‘eyeing his epaulette’ and switches to speaking ‘measured English’ (419).

The Scottish characters (always Highlanders) link Canada to the land clearances, and the events of the Jacobite uprising. The Scottish character asks a question, in which by implication Canada appears to be the progressive, forward-looking ‘lucky’ country and Scotland seems outdated and anti-modern. When MacDonald says to the Highlander that he is ‘from Canada. From Cape Breton’ (NGM 243), the Highlander responds: ‘That’s where a lot of people went after *it* happened’ (NGM 243), presumably a reference to the land clearances. In a similar interaction in ‘Clearances’, the Highland shepherd asks ‘You’re from Canada? You’re from the Clearances?’ (419). Canada is synonymous with land clearances in the minds of these Highlanders. The shepherd said ‘both statements in the form of questions and pronounced the word ‘Clearances’ as if it were a place instead of a matter of historical eviction’ (419). The ‘Clearances’ has the importance and power of a literal place in the understanding of the shepherd. In both Catriona and MacDonald’s interactions, when their Scottish hosts establish they are talking to a Canadian of Scottish descent, the host proceeds to mention Bonnie Prince Charlie. Such an association

between Canada and the Jacobite rebellion seems odd when considered in an historical sense, but it is in keeping with the blurry myth of all things ‘Emigrant’ being linked to the brave and rebellious Charlie and his mythological supporters, the heroic Highlanders.

Canada is viewed with wonder and intrigue by the Scottish characters, whose conversations paint them as figures out of the 18th century. Catriona is told by the old man of Moidart that those who went to Canada were ‘the lucky ones’ (NGM 148). The old man then asks Catriona ‘Is it true that in Canada, the houses are made of wood?’ (NGM 148). It seems that this elderly Highlander who lives in a small stone dwelling, can barely conceive of housing made out of wood, commenting ‘What a strange thing’ (NGM 149). Similarly, the shepherd of ‘Clearances’ asks: ‘is it possible that in Canada you can own your own land?’(420). Upon hearing that in Canada one can own their own land, the awe-stricken shepherd replies ‘Fancy that’ (420). This line of questioning creates a contrast between Scotland and Canada, by which Canada appears the lucky country of modern housing and equality and Scotland becomes a place characterised by simplistic shepherds and rheumy-eyed old men in stone houses. In the closing of the interaction in ‘Clearances’, the shepherd collapses several hundred years of history. He says that after the land clearances ‘there were not many people left’, and now most of the young men are ‘in the war or in Glasgow’, but he is still here ‘working for the estate and looking after sheep that are not my own’(421). The shepherd’s characterisation constructs the idea that ‘Scotland’ and its history were frozen in time when the emigrants left. When MacDonald tells the Highlander he meets at the train station the he has come to Scotland because he is ‘trying to leave the past for a while’, the Highlander laughs and say ‘Interesting place you’ve come for that...Perhaps you’re coming to the past’(NGM 245). He then leads MacDonald off to the bar so they can talk about *Bliadha Thearlaich* (Charlie’s Year).

Scotland in these passages becomes a place, quite literally, of the past; some magic portal for those who are descended from Scottish emigrants to pass into and discover their own ancestry. The Cape Breton characters have their imaginings of Scotland confirmed through their interactions with the Scottish characters, and Scotland provides the pilgrims with the much longed for sense of ‘coming home’. Catriona describes how once she began speaking Gaelic with the Highlanders she meets, the language ‘poured out of me, like some subterranean river that had been within me and now burst forth’ (NGM 150). The ‘lost language’ which has been trapped within Catriona has now been released and she is ‘home’. Sitting in the stone house in Moidart is ‘like being in Grandpa and Grandma’s kitchen’ (NGM 150). She and her Highland hosts are so overcome by her ‘return’, that ‘all of us began to cry’ and Catriona is told ‘it is as if you never left’ (NGM 150). MacLeod’s Cape Breton characters’ perception of Scotland, as being one large village of relatives ready to embrace them, is confirmed through their visits.

There is a scene in Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Diviners*, in which the protagonist Morag Gunn goes to Scotland and nearly cries when she arrives at Culloden because ‘there is such a place. It really exists, in the external world’.²⁶ Morag is so moved to see that an historical emblem which is key to her understanding of her past is also a physical place with dirt and grass. In MacLeod’s depiction, modern Scotland becomes a symbol of ancestry and the beginning point of a story of exile and displacement, rather than a physical place. Kirsten Sandrock notes that MacLeod creates ‘mnemonic landscapes’²⁷ in which the characters feel ‘closer to their Scottishness than their Canadianness.’²⁸ This ‘heart across the Atlantic’ element of MacLeod’s characters identity is problematic. When an identity is constructed on a place which is remote, or even non-existent, confrontation with the realities and flaws of that place are avoided. MacLeod’s characters

²⁶ Laurence, p. 384.

²⁷ Sandrock, p. 175.

²⁸ Sandrock, p. 175.

construct their identity, in part, on a place which does not exist, and there is an obvious comfort in this. If the place is not real, it can be as wind-swept and dire as the emigrants' descendents would have themselves believe. Canada, in contrast to this construction of Scotland, appears as the 'lucky' country, where every good Scot would yearn to go. Cape Breton Island, as economically repressed as it is, is included in this golden new world of hope and homeowner-ship. Although sentimentalised, these journeys to Scotland reaffirm a sense of worth for those whose ancestors left. It is easy to see why the myth of Scotland as a country of shepherds and small stone dwellings is an important part of the self-preservation for the Cape Breton Scots.

Chapter Two - Stepping Forward, Looking Back:

Journeys

Alistair MacLeod is an author who is keenly concerned with the motif of ‘the journey’. His stories tell of long journeys across ice, water and the vast Canadian landscapes. These physical voyages, like the travels to Scotland undertaken by the two MacDonald siblings and the narrator of ‘Clearances’ discussed in the previous chapter, give rise to the emotional and spiritual journeys of the characters. MacLeod illustrates how Cape Breton Islanders establish their identities through their movements from and back to their island homeland. The mode of transport used for the journey is as important as the destination. This chapter considers the journeys undertaken by boat, plane and car. Boat journeys are central to the life of the Cape Breton Islanders. Boats provide both a source of income, and a means of reaching the mainland. They are also a reminder of the Scottish emigrant ancestors of MacLeod’s characters. In modern times, boats are associated with tourists, who come to Cape Breton to admire the scenery and the fishermen ‘folk’ they have seen in tourism literature. The tourists also arrive by cars through the motorways which now link Cape Breton to the rest of Canada. Cars are, perhaps surprisingly, the dominant means of journey-making in MacLeod’s stories. They allow for the Islanders to make fast exits from their homeland as they venture into the modern world of education, urbanisation and increased job prospects. When characters make homeward pilgrimages to Cape Breton, seeking out their heritage and identity, cars and highways give way to old tracks and forgotten pathways. Boats once again become the symbol of the journeys of the Cape Breton Islander.

Journeys can be seen in both the form and content of MacLeod’s stories. The narrative of the stories often takes the reader on a temporal journey, usually moving from the present tense of an adult narrator into a story from their childhood. ‘The Boat’, a story about a young man’s decision not to continue his family’s fishing legacy, begins in present tense

– ‘There are times even now, when I lie awake...(1)’ – before guiding the reader back to the past setting of the narrator’s youth. ‘Winter Dog’ also moves from present to past tense, by establishing the present sense in the opening line: ‘I am writing this in December’ (249). The sighting of a dog in the narrator’s front yard moves the narrative back to past memories, as the narrator notes: ‘I first saw such a dog when I was twelve’ (254). In other stories, the journey is to a past which predates the narrator’s own life. ‘As Birds Bring Forth the Sun’ opens like a fable with: ‘Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea’ (310). It is only at the end of the story that the tense moves forward in time to the narrator’s present tense with the lines ‘The large and gentle man....(of the fable) was my great-great-great grandfather’ (317). These movements through tense are one of the techniques which make MacLeod’s stories so powerful. The reader is confronted or grabbed by a narrator in the present tense, who is desperate to unburden themselves by telling a story from the past. These troubled narrators are not unlike ‘Coleridge’s ancient mariner’ whom MacLeod has cited as one of his inspirations for his ‘narrative predilection’ for the present tense.¹ Like Coleridge’s work, MacLeod’s stories take the reader on a journey in which the past and the present often overlap and blur together, so that it is a voyage through emotions and morals which the reader undergoes, as well as a movement through different temporal spaces.

Sailing From One World To The Next

To live on an island is to endure isolation. MacLeod’s Islanders are both reliant on, and at the mercy of, the ocean, as they make their voyages to and from their island homes. The sober reality of being at the mercy of such a mistress runs through MacLeod’s work, from the tragedy of the MacDonald parents’ drowning in *No Great Mischief* and the death of *Calum Ruadh*’s wife at sea, to the woman in ‘Island’ who cannot cross to the mainland to

¹ Nicholson, ‘Signatures of Time’, p. 92.

attend her parents' funeral, and her grandmother who was forced to paddle out into the water, with the body of her dead husband, to attract help from the main land.

Boats are symbols of the past, and at times evoke mythical worlds. In thinking of the Scottish Diaspora, the boat is a portal from the world of Scotland and the known, into the unknown New World. In these emigration boat journeys, the travellers make the transition not just from one physical place to the next, but also from one identity to another. While making rough trans-Atlantic crossings, they shed their past lives and vocations to assume the identity of the 'Scottish emigrant'; an identity defined either by a sense of exile or adventure. The boat is a talisman of Scotland for the emigrants, as it is a physical object which bridges the emotional gap between the past and present lives. In 'Winter Dog', the narrator's ancestral family house is built out of materials that were washed up by the wrecking of an emigration ship, *Judith Franklin*. The ship was washed ashore on Cape Breton during the period when the narrator's 'great grandfather', himself a Scottish emigrant, was physically and figuratively claiming the Island as his new home through building a house. The house becomes a physical patchwork of the ship's materials and the timber from trees of the new land, and is a 'sort of symbolic marriage between the new and the old' (258). The boat which was wrecked is a permanent fixture in the emigrants' lives after they have journeyed on it. By looking at the 'wooden chests and trunks and various glass figurines' (258) which have become part of the house, the travellers are transported through memory to their former lives and identities.

In other instances in MacLeod's stories, boats facilitate a journey to another, fantastical world. The young twins of 'Vision' travel by boat to Canna Island, an island of folk stories, mystery and the witch-like blind woman. A shift in the weather as the boat travels from the mainland to the mythical island, from sunny 'when the boat left the

wharf' (332) to a storm when they arrive at Canna, marks the transition from the real to the mystical. Whilst on their boat journey, the boys themselves undergo physical changes to prepare them for their adventure. They are given 'two men's oil slicks to wear' (332) to protect them from the rain. The boys depart the boat wearing these long dark clothes. They assume new guises and forms specifically for the island. The boat allows the boys to access a fantastical place and to take on new roles and identities which are specific to this alternative reality. The boat in 'As Birds Bring Forth The Sun' allows its passengers to only glimpse a mystical world. The two teenage sons of the story remain on the boat as their father steps onto the island to greet his beloved *cu mor glas* (hound). From the boat they are able to witness the bond between this character, part pet and part creature from folklore, and their father. The boys are also 'still on the boat' (314), and unable to reach their father when he is savagely mauled to death by the hound's puppies. In the weeks following their father's death, the sons 'circled the island tentative in their boats' (315) for signs of the mythical creatures. They cannot bring themselves to leave their boat - their means of passage to such a strange place - and to step completely onto the island location of the folklore beast. The boat is the mode of transport most associated with journeys into realms of fantasy, attesting to the transitional, otherworldly quality of water and water crossings.

Boats are an important link to the first journey to Cape Breton, but they are also symbols of the burdens and responsibilities which hinder the outward journeys of the Island's younger generations. The defining boat of MacLeod's work will always be the *Jenny Lynn*, the lobster boat of MacLeod's first published short-story, 'The Boat'. *Jenny Lynn* symbolises the physically gruelling life of a fisherman; a life which the narrator's father has lived and which the narrator himself hopes to escape by leaving the Island to be educated. As the only son of an only son, the narrator has been made aware from an early age that 'the boat' will one day be his responsibility. The phrase 'the boat' is repeated

with almost farcical frequency in the dialogue of the characters, so that the young narrator and the reader understand that ‘it must be very important to everyone’ (3). The boat represents all the burdens (familial, cultural, and social) which trap this young 20th century man from ever leaving the Island. The narrator’s love and loyalty to his ageing father means that he reconciles himself to understanding that his dream of education was ‘a silly shallow selfish dream’ (21). He promises to stay on the Island and work the boat, for as long as his father lives. The boat encapsulates two key elements of what it means to live on an island like Cape Breton; it is both an ancient mode of transport, necessary for ferrying to and from an isolated island, and it is also a means for making a seasonal, physically demanding income, sourced from the environment. For the narrator of ‘The Boat’, his journey beyond a life of isolation and physical labour will never be possible as long as he is metaphorically chained to ‘the boat’ of his duties and loyalties.

Questions of Travel

Poet Elizabeth Bishop, herself a life-long visitor to Nova Scotia, offers: *‘Is it lack of imagination that makes us come /to imagined places, and not just stay at home?’*² From the guide boats which ferry them in, many of Macleod’s travellers to Cape Breton seek out, and find, the imagined island they have seen in the romanticised tourism literature: a place of folksy fishermen and pre-industrial island dwellers. The guise through which the tourists view Cape Breton reduces the father fisherman of ‘The Boat’, who has lived a gruelling life of self-sacrifice, to a caricature of a quaint, folk-music singing fisherman. Financial necessity has meant that the fisherman gives guided boat rides, using his fishing boat. The traditional fishing and farming industries of Cape Breton have been forced to make way for the new dominant industry, tourism. The reality of fishing has been sanitised for the tourists who sit ‘awkwardly’ on the ‘thwarts where the newspapers were

² Elizabeth Bishop, ‘Questions of Travel’, *Complete Poems 1927-1979* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), pp. 93-94 (p. 94).

spread to cover the splattered blood and entrails' (12). The fisherman begins by singing the simple sea shanties which the tourists expect to hear. He then spontaneously breaks away from his role as entertainer and begins to sing songs of substances and poignancy, 'laments and the wild and haunting Gaelic war songs' (14). Whilst these songs express the man's pride in his culture and grief at parts of his own life, the tourists only see the songs as more fodder for their 'tape recorders'(13). They imagine him as 'Our Hemmingway' (15), unconsciously overlooking the fact that this title sits as awkwardly as the fisherman does while trying to entertain them; his bulky fisherman's clothes' were 'too big for the green and white lawn chair in which he sat'(15) and the 'beach umbrella jarred against his sun burnt face' (15). Likewise, the narrator of 'Island' is stylised by a tour guide operator as the 'mad woman of the Island' and the tourists readily believe this construction, as they peer at her, the passing curiosity, from behind their binoculars and cameras' (406). Both images are entirely fabricated for the benefit of the tourists, and the tourists are all too eager to take such skewed characterisations as fact, because they are seeing what they imagined they would see.

The tourists to Cape Breton are presented by MacLeod as passive travellers with little interest in the society of the area in which they are vacationing. They come to the Island with a sense of entitlement to use the area as a 'recreation area' (426) and disregard the fact that the Island is also a 'home' to many who are 'trying to make a living' (426). Government policy supports this 'reconfiguration of place' in favour of the tourists.³ The Island is increasingly being turned into a playground for the tourists, with their needs and desires being put before that of the residents.⁴ In 'Clearances', the 'delicate beautiful nets' for salmon fishing have been banned by the government, to conserve stock for the

³ Herb Wylie, 'Going Out Of Their Way: Tourism, Authenticity, and Resistance in Contemporary Atlantic-Canadian Literature', *English Studies In Canada*, 34.2-3 (2008), 159-180 (p. 165).

⁴ For a discussion on how MacLeod and Sheldon Currie use their stories to argue against such commercial driven practices see: Thomas Hodd, 'Shoring Against Our Ruin: Sheldon Currie, Alistair MacLeod, and the Heritage Preservation Narrative', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 33. 2 (2008), 191-209.

'summer anglers'(426). The 'park'- the Cape Breton Highlands National Park - is likened to a 'slow moving glacier' which is constantly 'claiming more and more' land from the Islanders (426). The natural resources which are integral to the locals' lives and livelihoods have become consumed by the tourism industry. When the narrator of the story sells his land to a pair of tourists, the would-be purchasers comment on the lack of people in the area, saying the area is: 'nice and quiet' (429). The narrator responds soberly to what he interprets as a comment on the trend of out-migration by explaining that many young Islanders have emigrated to 'the States...Halifax or South Ontario'(429). The tourist's remark is in fact an expression of delight at the area being deserted. As visitors to the Island, the tourists view changes in the area, like increasing depopulation, as another perk in their potential purchase rather than a sign of the Island's cultural demise.

In contrast to the uninformed visitors to Cape Breton, who seek out inauthentic and formulaic experiences, MacLeod's Island characters are presented as inquisitive and interested travellers, who strive to find meaningful experiences from their vacation journeys. The narrator of 'Clearances' remembers a holiday he and his wife made to Prince Edward Island, 'in the time before the Anne of Green Gables craze' (414). The couple 'did not really know what they were supposed to visit' (414) and chose not to blithely tour the exhibits and businesses specifically aimed at providing the 'tourist' experience of the province. They visited a wool factory, a place which appealed to their own interests but was not touted as a tourist destination. To them, the factory was as enjoyable as 'if they had visited a religious shrine or a monument of historical significance' (414). They take away from their visit a blanket which lasts throughout their lifetime, 'the blanket had been with them when his wife died' (414), showing that the Islanders seek vacation journeys which are meaningful experiences that they can use to enrich their own lives back on Cape Breton.

Fly Away Home

Travelling as a tourist is a form of sentimentalised voyeurism, in which the tourist imagines they are seeing an authentic representation of the lives of the people in the places they visit. In MacLeod's works, those Islanders who have emigrated from Cape Breton also exhibit this romanticised assumption of the comforts of the Island. The airport, 'a symbol of impermanence...glisteningly permanent' (141) becomes the vehicle for the 'exiled' Islanders' longing thoughts of the place they have left. These travellers think of Cape Breton as their spiritual home, but they have chosen to make their physical home in other parts of Canada and the world. Catriona MacDonald, who lives as an adult in Calgary with her Polish husband, describes how sometimes when she is at the airport she will go to the gates departing for Nova Scotia to be amongst those Islanders going home and 'to listen to their accents and share in their excitement'(178). She watches wistfully as planes fly out, full of people who tell themselves that to be from the Maritimes is something to be 'proud of, rather than ashamed of'(179). But Catriona, for all her sentiment, is watching ghosts from her childhood as much as she is watching real people depart. Although her heart may be in Cape Breton, her journey has taken her to a comfortable life in suburban Alberta. Her thoughts of the proud Maritimers are as romantic as those of the tourists to the area, as she watches from a place of physical and emotional distance, and her romantic thinking of Nova Scotia becomes similar to the inauthentic imaginings of the tourists.

For the adult narrator of 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood', the airport allows a brief moment of imagining towards another life. He flies from Cape Breton after a visit in which he hands over full custody of his child to the child's maternal grandparents, and prepares to return to life as a single man in the 'North American mid-west' (122). At the airport, a

fellow traveller and his family allows the narrator a glimpse of an alternative reality which he could have had, if he had not relinquished custody of his child. The narrator and the fellow traveller 'go down the wheeled-up stairs together, donning our sunglasses and stepping across the heated concrete' (142). The lives of these two strangers momentarily overlap. When they exit the airport and re-enter their lives, the fellow traveller has his two young children and wife race towards him with joy. The narrator is confronted with the emotional reunion that he will never have, because to him it is more important to continue his life in urban America than return to live in Cape Breton, his island of origin where his son is being raised.

Flight is the quickest and most modern form of travel, yet it is also one of the most passive. In Macleod's stories, the symbol of the highway also links modern travel with passive journeys. Highways are the incongruous but life-giving lines of modernity which cut across the rural, pastoral lives of the Island's inhabitants. They offer a way out for those who live in Cape Breton, and a way in for those foreigners who arrive annually with 'the inevitable lobster traps fastened to their roofs' (181). Travellers on these highways become apathetic consumers of a journey, rather than autonomous and self-determining voyagers. You can only join the highway 'in certain places and if your destination is directly upon it' (NGM 2). Such journeys ask nothing of the traveller other than their agreement to travel on the 'conveyor belt' (NGM 2) to a pre-decided point. MacLeod depicts the highways and main roads as dangerous and oppressive places, filled with 'scuttling Volkswagens' 'overcrowded station wagons', 'weaving, swerving motorcyclist'(145) and other obstacles for the motorists to dodge if they are to arrive safely at their end point. To drive on such motorways is to play Russian roulette. Whose journey will end in the 'haven of home' and who will end up dying in 'twisted, spectacular wreckage' (145)? Beyond Nova Scotia, 'it's a big, fast, brutal road' (145),

yet many Islanders undertake journeys on such roads as they seek opportunities and experiences outside of their known environs.

‘A Desperate Sense of Urgency’

MacLeod acknowledges that for most people of the Maritime provinces, ‘it seems to be part of their history to be going away and then trying to get back’⁵ from their homeland. His stories closely consider the choice which faces those who are raised somewhere like Cape Breton Island; a place of beauty which provides its inhabitants with a strong sense of cultural belonging and identity, but which may offer limited scope for occupational or educational development. It is a choice much like that seen in the ‘head’ versus ‘heart’ dilemma of Grandpa and Grandfather in Chapter 1. The rational act of the ‘head’ is to leave the Island, but the urging of the heart will always be to remain in the comforting embrace of home. Those characters who do leave and ‘step into the newness...often look back’ (209) with longing at the island they are leaving.

The Islanders who leave often drive with a ‘desperate sense of urgency’ (46), aware that a prolonged exit may dissolve their mettle to depart. The miners of ‘The Closing Down of Summer’ leave the Island in such a way, driving their cars ‘hard and fast...not stopping all night’ (207) from the beaches of Cape Breton to the urban sprawl of Toronto, for their annual departure from their homeland. These Highland giants of ‘over 6 feet and nearly two hundred pounds’ (183), all with bodies that bear the scars of their work, drive their equally large and disfigured ‘Cadillacs with banged-in fenders’ (184) in such an extreme way in an attempt to quash their sadness at their annual departure from their families and culture. The cars, like the men, are pushed to their physical limit as they quickly ferry the men away from a place they are ‘not ready to leave’(185), and on to the Ontario mines.

⁵ Alistair MacLeod, qtd. in Garrod, ‘Alistair MacLeod Interview’, p. 158.

Necessity forces the miners to depart, and the Cadillacs allow for an uncomplicated exit from the place where they would rather be.

In 'The Vastness of the Dark', James, the young man who embarks on his own journey from Cape Breton, notes that his father, like the 'Summer' miners, has 'always used his body as if it were a car, with the accelerator always to the floor' (36). James' desire not to 'become as my father'(33), who has been physically crippled by his work as a miner, is what spurs him on to leave Cape Breton on his eighteenth birthday. James attempts to convince himself and his family that he is comfortable with his rational choice to leave home to seek a better future. He speaks of his keenness to leave 'behind this grimy Cape Breton mining town whose prisoner I have been all my life' (33). Despite his outward bravado, James is scared and hesitant about leaving his entire world to make a new life somewhere else. He looks to his parents to provide the emotional pleas to stay that will either strengthen his resolve to leave, or persuade him to stay. But his parents do little to dissuade him from leaving. After hearing of his announced departure, his mother only makes a 'slight change in rhythm' as she stokes the fire, and his father half-heartedly says that 'something might turn up' by way of local employment for James, 'but in his eyes I see no strong commitment in his words' (40). His parents' lack of dramatic protests at his departure makes James feel 'disappointed and angry as I had thought somehow my parents would cling to me in a kind of desperate fashion and I would have to be very firm and strong' (40). Caught between the desires of his heart and the rational thinking of his head, James' departure from his home town is in part a self-made exile created through his false bravado about his supposed keenness to leave.

The vehicles that drive James away from his family and heritage are symbolic of the journey which he is attempting to make; from rural and coal-dependent to urban and

modern. He views 'each of the cars on the one-way street' as being 'bound for a magical destination' (46) that will lift him away from his current life. James is first picked up by a coal truck which makes so much 'noise and rides so roughly that conversation with the driver is impossible' (45). This vehicle simulates the experience of being in a mine for James, who is forced to breathe in the smoky fumes of the truck just as miners take on the pollution of their work. The coal truck means that James is left with his own thoughts, like miners who are not able to verbally communicate whilst underground. James is then given a lift by 'three Negros' on the tray of their 'battered old blue Dodge pick-up' (46). The pick-up truck is slow, but James reflects: 'I will at least be moving and I will get there sooner or later' (46). A pick-up truck is a vehicle associated with physical labour and working-class jobs. The poor physical condition of this pick-up truck illustrates that James has not yet moved beyond the world of economic deprivation that he is trying to leave. Once James crosses the causeway and arrives on mainland Nova Scotia, he is picked up by a middle-aged travelling salesman in a more modern red car. The driver's non-labouring occupation and status as an outsider to Nova Scotia emphasises the world which James is moving towards, one of professional occupations, less physically demanding living conditions, and increased urbanisation.

The closer James comes to entering into the urban world, symbolised by the red car and its driver, the more he begins to falter in his decision to leave. James becomes like Orpheus, who as he and Eurydice 'neared the surface of the Earth', could not resist glancing 'backward with a look that spoke his love'.⁶ The final vehicle in which James rides is an old car driven by a group of Cape Breton miners, who resemble James' father in age and physicality. They offer him a lift on to Blind River in Ontario, but by this stage James has begun to be drawn back to Cape Breton in his thoughts and emotions. Increasingly motivated by his heart and ignoring his previous rationalism of his head, he

⁶ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. by Horace Gregory (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 275.

can only respond: 'I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I'll have to make up my mind' (58). The physical distance between James and Cape Breton Island allows him the mental and emotional space to focus on positive aspects of his life there, and to gloss over what adulthood in his hometown would entail. He is left standing on the brink of an urban modern future, and yet is drawn to turn and spiral back into his past.

Talismans In The Tailgate

When James looks back on the Island he sees it 'rising mistily out of the greenness and white capped blueness of the sea' (46) and he thinks wistfully of 'green poplar leaves rustling softly and easily in the Nova Scotia dawn' (26). James becomes haunted by this desire to return, and he approaches each successive milestone between him and his origin with 'exhausted relief' (49) as he attempts to outrun the emotional pull of Cape Breton. Whereas once the Island was the 'prison', now the motor vehicle which moves him away from the Island holds him in 'like captive passengers on a roller coaster' (48) with its 'tires (that) hiss' as the road stretches ahead 'like a bucking, shimmering snake'(48). In the closing scene of the story, James' indecision in accepting the miners' offer of a lift to Ontario suggests that he does succumb to the pull to go home. He chooses to believe the sentimental parting words of his grandfather, who said that staying on the Island is the 'only way you'll ever be content' (44), rather than the realistic pleas of his grandmother, who warns: 'if you return here, you will never get out and this is not a place to lead a life' (42). The reader understands that in giving in to such sentimentality, James is sealing his own fate to a life in the mines that will both 'bust your balls' and 'break your heart'(58).

Although the cars speed James away physically, the Island clings on as he feared it would. For the miners of 'Closing', the spirit of Cape Breton remains with them as they travel onwards to Ontario and eventually Africa. When they drive away from the Island, they

catch some of a 'resilient young spruce tree', an icon of Nova Scotia, on the 'mufflers and oil pans' of their cars and these twigs remain 'wedged in the grillwork' (185). As the bodies of the miners are mangled and maimed by their work in different mines across the world, the twig symbolises their youth spent on the Island and the way their bodies were when they first left; 'resilient' and 'young'. The miners carry these emblems of the natural beauty of their homeland and their own past with them, like talisman or 'symbols of identity' (185), on their journey to the mines of Africa. The modern symbol of the car cannot diminish the power of heritage and culture which the twig represents. The journey of the body may be out, away and forward, but for the miners and James, the journey of the heart is always back to Cape Breton.

An Education

When Grandpa of *No Great Mischief* arrives home to Cape Breton after a car journey to Halifax, he remarks 'Nothing bad can happen to us now' (NGM 108). His comment embodies the feeling of 'Cape Breton as spiritual home' that seems to draw the 'Summer' miners and James to want to stay. Grandpa makes this comment as the MacDonald family drive home having attended Alexander's medical school graduation. The mood in the car is light and jovial, as they are returning home to their beloved Island. The family 'drove and waved (to passersby) and sung our songs and the sun glinted off my uncle's car...and tinted the flat, calm, ocean' (109). The Island's physical beauty is intertwined with references to the Gaelic songs and sense of community which create the Island culture for MacLeod's characters. The trip's purpose was to celebrate Alexander's academic accomplishments, but the real celebration, at least for the older parental figures like Grandpa and Grandma, is the return to the homeland. Although Alexander's education will lead him to a life far beyond Cape Breton, he is at least temporarily coming home to be amongst his clan.

Alexander and the narrator of 'The Boat' both struggle with the knowledge that in pursuing their academic talents they are entering into 'other ways of life'(198) that their families do not understand. The young men appreciate that they must embark on 'the inevitable journey...to distant, lonely worlds'(199) without their families. When Alexander graduates, Grandfather comments that Alexander's degree will allow him a life free of work, by which Grandfather means that Alexander will not spend his life 'pulling the end of the bucksaw or pushing the boat of the *Calum Ruadh's* point in the freezing water up to my waist' (NGM 101). By choosing university and a professional life, the young men are also turning their backs on their familial responsibilities to carry on their family's traditions and to continue working the land, which may have been in the family for many generations. The narrator of 'The Boat' is particularly caught by such a predicament as the only son of an ailing fisherman father. His mother sees education as the force which is stealing her children away, saying that: 'God will see to those who waste their lives reading useless books when they should be doing their work' (10). Although these young men do decide to become educated and leave the Island, such a decision comes with the feeling that they are betraying their families and choosing a softer option than the physical lives their peers will lead.

Alexander is never able to get past his feelings of guilt that his education allowed him a more privileged life than his brothers. He blames himself in part for the death of his cousin, red-haired Alexander, in an Ontario mine because the death took place on the day that Alexander was graduating in Halifax. Alexander is very aware that he has avoided the mining life of his cousin, through gaining a degree and ascending to a middle-class life of dentistry. In gaining this education, Alexander has become ostracised from his brothers and clansmen who mine, and this separation is highlighted in the second car journey that Alexander makes during the summer after he graduates, a 'strange and solitary hundred mile journey' (NGM 112) to collect the body of red-haired Alexander.

The mining clansmen fly home from Ontario together, and thus are expediently and seamlessly transported from the place of the death and their immediate shock at its occurrence, back to their home and the collective mourning of the family in Cape Breton. In contrast, Alexander's long car journey, which has him driving solo away from his family at a time of grief, emphasises the isolation and separateness which mark his life now he has embarked on the lonely journey of education.

'The End In Every Way'

Although Alexander spends much of his adult life away, working in the sterile dental clinics in urban Canada, he always views Cape Breton as his place of belonging. When MacLeod's characters seek to reconnect with their Island identity, and make journeys home to Cape Breton, they increasingly shed the symbols of modernity which have carried them into the urban world. The power of the ocean, synonymous with the Islander's identity, gives older forms of transport, like boats and old country tracks, a heightened importance in these return voyages. As the narrator of 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' approaches Cape Breton by car, he is immediately confronted by the ocean, and admires the harbour which is 'like a tiny, peaceful womb' where 'trout fleck dazzlingly on their side' (119). The water is a source of life for those who live by it. The narrator views the Island as the end point of all journeys. It is the conclusion of his physical 'twenty-five-hundred-mile journey' and the destination of his emotional voyage; 'the road ends here' (120). The man must confront his past, the son he left behind.

The decision to delve into his Cape Breton past means the narrator must 'walk beyond the road's end' (120) and leave his car behind. He toys with the idea of retreating back into the modern world he has come from, by 'restarting the car's engine and driving back' (120), but instead begins to 'descend the rock path that winds tortuously and narrowly

along....the cliff's edge to the sea'(120). The car journey back to the modern world is the simpler and safer option. Cars encase their passengers in their own self-contained, autonomous cocoons, and are a metaphor for urban living, where people live independent lives with little community interaction. In contrast, life in an island community is less contained and requires a much more intimate knowledge of the people, and the physical landscape, in the area. The narrator chooses to step beyond his modern, disconnected life and embrace the physicality and risk of his Island identity. The narrow path he must walk down places him on the 'cliff's edge', between the urban land of his recent past and 'the sea' which represents the life of a Cape Breton Islander.

In 'The Road to Rankin's Point', the young schoolteacher Calum makes a similar shift from modern life to Island identity, as he drives from the 'highways', packed with 'motorhomes' and 'overcrowded station wagons'(145), to the 'unpretentious' and 'narrow, paved roads' of Cape Breton (144) . The natural wilderness of the Island dominates the environment, and acts to inhibit the movement of Calum's car; the 'alders lean and hang from the left bank' and the 'overreaching branches of the silver birch...slap across the hood and windshield, impeding visions and almost the passage' (146). These overgrown passages are not suited, nor welcoming to the modern car which attempts to whip through them. Like the narrator of 'Lost Gift', for Calum, the Island and in particular Rankin Point, near his family's home, marks the completion of all his journeys, both his physical drive, and his spiritual journey. 'As one cannot drive beyond it, neither can one see beyond it farther up the coast. It is the end in every way' (146). Cape Breton remains in the minds and thoughts of those who leave it, so to make the physical homeward journey is also a spiritual 'homecoming'. Islanders are once again physically in the location that they consider to be their spiritual and cultural home.

To journey away from the car, an instant, modern form of movement and to tread forgotten paths and unmarked tracks is symbolic in MacLeod's work of a character travelling back into their own past. Knowledge of secret paths and tracks suggest an intimate, inherited understanding of the land that is known only to those who really belong on the Island. The miners of 'Closing' park their cars at a cliff that can only be accessed by 'a steep and winding zigzagged trail' (182); a special place which cannot be reached by the tourists. Archibald, of 'The Tuning of Perfection', links the out-migration of the young people and the associated loss of cultural knowledge with paths, noting that certain paths have fallen into 'disuse and become overgrown' now that so many people use 'automobiles' (273). Only Islanders know the history of the 'disused trails' and the 'wild road (which) clammers along the brink of the coast' that Elizabeth Bishop writes of in her poem 'Cape Breton'.⁷

The Final Crossing

Calum Rankin and Calum MacDonald of *No Great Mischief* both decide to make the return journey to Cape Breton Island when they know they are dying. The descriptions of these car journeys are almost identical. The drivers undergo a 'long ascent' of two miles to reach their final point (NGM 259/ 146), and the car either 'slides and bucks' (NGM 259) or 'grinds slowly and reluctantly'(151) up the steep incline. The mental and spiritual journeys of the two Calums are also similar, as both are returning to their place of belonging to seek solace and respite before death. Rankin's Point is where Rankin's grandmother has lived for 70 years, and the physical site which represents his family's identity. MacDonald's heart has always remained in Cape Breton, on his family's land, despite him spending most of his adult life in Ontario.

⁷ Bishop, 'Cape Breton', pp. 67-68.

For the men, the car journey takes them past locations that represent significant moments in their lives or family stories. When MacDonald drives east from Toronto with Alexander, they drive through Quebec, the home province of Fern Picard whom MacDonald killed. When the brothers stop for breakfast, MacDonald makes a kind of peace with his long held animosity towards Québécois people by asking for the local's breakfast dish of beans (*fèves au lard*) rather than the tourist's breakfast which the waitress expects him to want, and thanking the waitress with 'merci' (NGM 258). The brothers drive through Renous, in New Brunswick, which is 'home to the penitentiary' (NGM 258) where MacDonald was imprisoned, and through mining towns near to which MacDonald mined. MacDonald is figuratively working back through the elements of his adult life which have led him away from his homeland.

For Rankin, each milestone on the road up to his grandmother's house marks the losses of previous generations of his family. He drives past the bend in the road known as 'The Little Turn of Sadness' (151) because his grandfather was killed there, and is reminded of his father and grandmother finding their loved one dead in the snow. The naming of the site as the 'Little Turn of Sadness' alludes also to a familial and cultural heritage of loss through out-migration. Every time a Rankin has made the journey out of the Island, they have passed through the bend, and all arrivees at Rankin's Point are forced to think of those who have departed, when they themselves pass through. Calum drives on and thinks of how his family hauled the body of his grandfather, on a sleigh, for two miles up to the house, even when 'their own feet slipped on the icy rocks' and 'twice the body slipped off' (150) the sleigh. Faced with his own impending death and aware this may be the final time he himself drives along the road, Rankin is particularly mindful of the effect that this particular stretch of path has had on his family.

As these dying men near their resting points, the power of the ocean increasingly overwhelms their cars. The men who are 'going home' are engulfed by water, the element which defines what it is to be an Islander. The construction of the Canso Causeway in 1955 meant that cars could be the new boats, ferrying those who want to come to and go from Cape Breton with speed and ease. But as these men travel through their own memories concurrently with their physical drives home, they are confronted with the ocean in a similar way to their forefathers would have been. In 'Rankin', Calum describes how the old road is at the mercy of the ocean, and 'on wet days, it is impossible for the car to make the climb' (147). As the waves begin to pour over the car, and the 'sea cliffs slant down almost vertically' it feels as if 'the road runs into' (146) the ocean below. The road and those who travel on it become 'but a minor intrusion' in the ocean's path, as 'icy little streams cascade across (the road), washing it out' (146). The car which MacDonald drives is similarly overpowered by the rough Atlantic Ocean. A storm hits the island as the brothers approach the causeway to cross to Cape Breton. They drive 'as the waves are coming from the left, breaking' which makes the 'roadway invisible, buried under the foaming depths of the water' (NGM 260). Calum MacDonald, like a brave sea captain, yells out 'after the wave...then we'll go'(NGM 260). The car is pounded by the sea, 'hit by one wave and then another'. The brothers eventually arrive at Cape Breton, and are rewarded with the 'relatively serene'(NGM 260) homeland they love.

In these final journeys home, the car functions almost like a boat might do, especially in the causeway crossing of the MacDonalds. It is the skill of Calum MacDonald in reading the waves, and the men's courage to drive on through such rough conditions, which allows them to cross the causeway, much more so than the mechanics of the car. Such a crossing is a reconstruction of the first crossing, that the emigrants to Nova Scotia would have made, particularly the crossing by the original *Calum Ruadh* of *No Great Mischief*. Like the brother's causeway crossing, the voyage of the Ruadh clan to Nova Scotia was a

'bad voyage' (NGM 20). Once the family arrived at the main island, they were forced to row their shallops (small dingy boats) to Cape Breton, across the 'choppy fall seas' (NGM 23). The shallops would have provided barely adequate transport against the pounding sea, and like the MacDonald brothers and their car, the *Ruaidh* clan were lucky to successfully make the crossing. The Calums return to their homelands, the places which encapsulate their sense of familial and cultural identity, and through undertaking these journeys they are linked to the voyages of those who went before them.

Chapter Three - Horse and Hound: *Animals*

A loyal dog or much-loved horse is beside many of MacLeod's characters as they make their physical and emotional journeys. Animals, particularly domesticated animals like dogs and horses, are present throughout most of MacLeod's stories. They function as symbols of the strength and pride that MacLeod sees in the rural Cape Breton culture, but frequently animals, and their death, are yet another sign of the dying culture and heritage of the Island. MacLeod's use of animals is one of the binding threads in his work, which weaves together the themes discussed in this thesis: Scotland, journeys and death. The study of animals in human society and animal-human interaction ('animal studies') is an emerging and fast expanding field of inter-disciplinary academic study.¹ There is currently a small but growing body of work which examines animals in literature, but there is no extended critical discussion on animals in MacLeod's work outside of this chapter.² The use of animals in MacLeod's work can be divided into two main categories: (i) Loyal to the Bitter End: the Animal-Human relationship, and (ii) A Dying Beast: Animal Symbolism.

(i): Loyal To The Bitter End: The Animal-Human Relationship

The horses and dogs are the working animals of MacLeod's rural stories, whose loyalty, intelligence and workmanship is valued and relied on by the farming characters. In the

¹ The New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies notes that 'contributions to this field draw upon a wide range of disciplinary formations (including law and biological sciences)...(united) in a determination to find new ways of thinking about animals and about human-animal relationships'. 'About the NZ Centre for Human-Animal Studies', *New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies* <<http://www.nzchas.canterbury.ac.nz/about.shtml>> [accessed 24th May 2011].

Bernard Unti of the Human Society of the United States says: 'At this point, there is hardly an academic field in which animal studies is not thriving as an important sub-discipline.' 'News Releases 2011', *University of New England* <<http://www.une.edu/news/2011/mchughaward.cfm>> [accessed 24th May 2011].

² As stated in the introductory chapter, several critics have noted MacLeod's use of dogs, but I have not found any criticism which specifically discusses animal symbolism, or the animal-human relationship in MacLeod's work.

summers, whilst the ‘animals’ become plump, it is the ‘work horses which seemed to share our drudgery and weight loss’ (220). Likewise the dogs that MacLeod writes of are viewed as important members of the household. Dogs appear in seven of the sixteen short stories, as well as featuring prominently in *No Great Mischief*. Horses and hounds were some of the first species to be domesticated by humans, and are companion animals with which humans build close bonds and strong working relationships. In MacLeod’s work, the intense relationship that some of the humans form with their animals treads a fine balance between treating the horse or dog as a vital piece of farming equipment which supports economic growth (tool), and as an animal which fulfils the social and emotional needs of their masters (pet). His stories explore the questions which come out of these blurred relationships. At what point does a work animal become a companion? What are the implications, for both the animals and the humans, if these interspecies bonds become the key relationship in the human’s life? Finally, in the context of working animals and farms, what does the presence of ‘pets’ mean for the economy of Cape Breton Island?

Equine Adoration

Although many of MacLeod’s stories feature animals, there are only two animals which are ever given names: Scott, the former pit-pony of ‘In The Fall’ and Christy, the ever faithful mare of Calum in *No Great Mischief*. The owners of Scott and Christy have working relationships with their horses which develop into bonds of co-dependence and love. Both the fact that these horses are given names, and the form of these names, are significant. The act of naming implies that the animal is going ‘to be given special treatment and that individual attributes or personalities are likely to be claimed for them’.³ To give an animal a human name, rather than call them ‘Summer Cloud’ or ‘Cape

³ Alan Beck and Aaron Katcher, *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), p. 11.

Mabou', symbolically casts the animal in the role of 'virtual human'⁴. Scott and Christy are most certainly cast as 'humans' in their importance to their human companions.

Both men came into possession of their horses when they were teenagers; a time when the young men were experiencing the vulnerability which comes from such a period of greater freedoms and responsibilities.⁵ Scott was a pit pony when his master started at the mines, and Christy was 'gifted' (NGM 57) to a teenage Calum after he was forced to assume control of his family's land. Because the young men are without parental figures, the love that their horses show to them is especially appreciated. When Scott waits for his master 'throughout the night of bitter cold, untied and unnecessary' (102) while the young miner is on a drinking binge, it is a moment that the man is particularly moved by because 'before that night, he had never been waited for by any living thing' (103). Scott takes on the role of the concerned friend or parent, who patiently waits out the self-destructive behaviour of the young loved one.

The horse-human relationship is presented as one of equality and partnership. The 'Fall' narrator purchases Scott from the mining company when he leaves the mines so that they 'might both come out together to see the sun and walk upon the grass' (101). These simple desires are common to both a human and animal who have been underground for a long time. Partnership is also crucial to Calum and Christy's relationship. Christy is repeatedly referred to as having 'kept her part of the bargain' (NGM 73), through hauling in Calum's boat and pulling the sleigh. In return, Christy 'depends on us to do the right thing' (NGM 73). The bonds of unity and equality that Christy and Scott have with their

⁴ Clinton R. Sanders, 'Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Close Relationships between Humans and Non-Humans' *Symbolic Interaction*, 26.3 (2003), 405-426 (p. 411).

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.2003.26.3.405>> [accessed 18th April 2011].

⁵ Margaret Atwood notes that adolescents are drawn to 'companion or sexual-power figure animals such as dogs and animals.' *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 79.

masters move well beyond those seen between a working animal and its master, which would be valued solely for 'the practical services and economic services they provide'.⁶ The horses become the most significant 'person' in the men's lives.

Christy is the only character to whom Calum openly exhibits love and affection. She is at times likened to his lover, and at times likened to his child. Calum is never linked to any female love interests in the novel, and he has a difficult and fractured relationship with his family. When he returns to Cape Breton the funeral of his cousin, red-haired Alexander, Calum seeks comfort in being reunited with Christy. 'All afternoon, he lay on the warm grass, offering her bread and sugar cane'(NGM 122). Like a human couple, 'all day they stayed together on the green grass, giving and taking from each other' (NGM 122). Just as MacLeod's characters use Gaelic songs to communicate their emotions to each other, Calum uses song to illustrate his love for Christy. When Calum wants to commune with Christy he does this through 'crooning into her mane' (NGM 71) and to calm her in times of distress he sings to her 'in Gaelic...much as a parent might sing to a frightened child' (NGM 73). The image of the rebellious young man and his special bond with a horse is also seen in the more recent Cape Breton novel, *A Forest For Calum*. The rebellious and violent Duncan, a young 'Calum' figure, is drawn to attempting to save the life of 'Summer Cloud', the racing horse so crippled by drugs that he is 'unable to rise to his feet, his coat stained with the mess of manure and straw'.⁷ When Duncan is unable to prevent Summer Cloud's death, his companion sees 'his eyes fill with the only tears I ever saw Duncan shed'.⁸

⁶ James Serpell and Elizabeth Paul, 'Pets and the Development of Positive Attitudes To Animals', in *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*, ed. by Aubrey Manning and James Serpell (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 127-144 (p. 129).

⁷ Frank MacDonald, *A Forest For Calum* (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton Press, 2005), p. 109.

⁸ MacDonald, p. 109.

The bonds which the men develop with their horses come at the expense of fulfilling relationships with humans. Calum is a man who has never really fitted into the modern society in which his brother Alexander has been so successful. As a teenager who was forced to take on adult independence, his bond with Christy is a means of support and companionship. But as an adult, his continued dedication to Christy is a sign of his refusal to integrate fully into adult society. When Alexander is a teenager and Calum a young man, Alexander accidentally forgets to bring Christy's oats to reward her for coming to the shore, one day when the men are returning by boat. Calum's reaction to his brother's mistake is irrational and aggressive: 'He seized me by the front of my jacket and lifted me with my feet dangling above the side of the boat...I had the temporary sensation he might fling me over board' (NGM 73). Calum pushes away human relationships, and Christy comes to represent the perfect companion, who will always be subservient and never be able to talk back, question his actions, judge or chastise him. In their discussion on companion animals, Nandita Batra and Vartan P. Messier ask 'whether the love felt by a human for a named companion animal is not 'truly' love for an animal per se but rather the redirection of the type of love felt for a human being?'⁹ In the case of Calum, his love for Christy replaces and also prevents any possible love for humans. His bond with her allows him to avoid meaningful relationships with others, yet still have a being to express love and affection towards.

The relationship between Scott and his master in 'In The Fall' is a hindrance to the master having a loving marriage. Scott represents the master's youth and bachelorhood, and the wife is unable to fully connect with her husband whilst this symbol of her husband's past is in their lives. The master's wife 'bores' (103) of hearing the story of her husband's first love, Scott, waiting for him in the snow. When it comes time for Scott to be sold to the

⁹ Nandita Batra and Vartan P. Messier, 'Of Mice and Men: The Aporia Of Human-Animal (Dis)Continuum', in *Of Mice and Men: Animals in Human Culture*, eds. Nandita Batra and Vartan P. Messier (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 1-28 (p. 18).

grotesque slaughter man, McRae (because the family cannot afford to keep him) the wife is the voice of pragmatism and practicality. Scott's master's impassioned pleas, emotional outbursts of swearing, and 'knuckles, white and cold' (103) are met with the wife's calm statements that they cannot afford to keep Scott alive any longer. The wife's hair, a symbol of her femininity, is kept 'pulled back severely and coiled in a bun' (99), illustrating a lack of emotion or passion between the couple. It is only after Scott's departure that the wife assumes her role as the key figure of her husband's affections. She lets down her hair and allows it to flow in the wind so that it 'engulfs' her husband's head and he 'buries his face within its heavy darkness' (117). Scott's death removes the barrier which is stopping the master from being fully present in his adult life of responsibilities and practicality, and allows him to have a deeper relationship with his wife.

Before he can bond with his wife, the master of 'In the Fall' must go through a painful process of accepting that Scott's death is necessary economically for the survival of his human loved ones. His bond with Scott means that as he leads the horse to McRae's float which will take the horse to its death, the master begins to take on the physical attributes of a nervous horse. The petrified eyes of the master remind the master's son, the narrator, of the pain he saw in Scott's eyes when the horse was injured in a farming accident.

Scott's 'eyes then in their greyness had reflected fear and pain and almost a mute wonder at finding himself so painfully trapped' (106). In human and non-human animal interactions, eye contact is key to the human understanding of the feelings and experiences of the animal. 'Sustained eye contact is an element of intimacy that symbolises and reinforces the human-animal connection' and 'provides...information on the subjective experiences of the other'.¹⁰ Through his pained looks, Scott was able to non-linguistically convey to his master his fear and panic at being trapped. Now Scott's master is trapped, unable to justify taking food from his children to pay for Scott's

¹⁰ Sanders, p. 416.

upkeep, but equally unable emotionally to come to terms with his friend's condemnation. Scott's trust in his master means that when he is lead by his master on to the float he shows no fear, following 'eagerly' with his stride 'confident' and 'his hooves echo[ing] firmly (113), such is his unwavering trust in his master. It is his master who 'hesitates and seems to flinch' (113) and it is the master's 'foot which seems to recoil as it touches the planking'(113). In assuming the characteristics of a frightened horse, the master becomes animal-like himself, thus Scott and his owner are equally at the mercy of McRae and his whip. Scott and his owner become equals through their mutual vulnerability.

To Love Too Much

The bonds that the master of 'In The Fall' and Calum develop with their horses mean that the men are not fully engaged with the human world. To have such an intense bond with an animal is presented as unconstructive. In MacLeod's use of two key dog relationships, this sense that the bonds between humans and animals are negative is further emphasised. In *No Great Mischief*, the family dog's intense loyalty to her human family leads to her violent death. When Alexander's parents and brother drown on the ice, and the surviving family and dog move to the mainland, the dog hurls herself 'without hesitation into the open water'(NGM 51) and swims back towards her family's home. The dog attempts to protect the island, which she 'thought was hers' (NGM 52), from the new lighthouse keeper. She has her 'hackles raised and teeth bared' (NGM 52) as the lighthouse keeper 'pumped four bullets into her loyal and waiting heart. And later he caught her by the hind legs and threw her body into the sea' (NGM 52). The dog is treated as just another pest which needs to be deposed of. Because the reader had been privy to the thoughts and feelings of the animal, her death in such a way seems more shocking and undignified. In perceiving that the island 'was hers' she had taken on figurative possession of the land; a human trait which illustrates how her relationship with her human family had created a human-animal intermediate space, where the lines of authority and dominance become

more blurred. The description of the heart as ‘waiting’ implies that the death was inevitable because of the extent of the dog’s love for her family. In commenting on the dog’s death, Grandpa says: ‘It was in those dogs to care *too* much and to try *too* hard’(NGM 52). This phrase is repeated at least twice more in relation to the dead dog. Her need to protect her loved ones, in this case the human family, becomes a fatal flaw, illustrating what the equine relationships of Calum and the master in ‘In The Fall’ also show; that inter-species bonds are at times deeply destructive.

The blurring of animal and human bonds is expanded on in ‘As Birds Bring Forth The Sun’, in which an intense human-to-dog bond is the source of a family’s demise. A farmer chooses to keep a puppy which is mysteriously placed on his door-step, despite the advice from ‘more practical members of his family’ (311) that the dog is a ‘waste of time’ (311) and should be killed in a similar way to the *No Great Mischief* dog, with its neck ‘broken by his strong hands’ or that ‘he grasp her by the hind legs and swing her head hard against the rock’ (311). The man feeds the puppy milk by hand ‘spooning in the sweetened milk’ and ignoring the ‘needle-like sharpness of her small teeth’(311). Through such intimate acts of care the relationship becomes more parent and child than ‘master’ and ‘dog’. Neither the man’s human young (his sons) nor the dogs own young can understand this interspecies bond which goes beyond a human concern for animal welfare, to the more primal ‘care of one’s young’ instinct. The man is eventually savagely killed by the dog’s puppies, when they misread the man’s joyous reunion with their mother as an attack on her. The dog’s young ‘fell upon him in a fury, slashing his face and tearing aside his lower jaw and ripping out his throat’(314). The man’s sons are forced to watch this act, and are unable to help their father. Just like the *No Great Mischief* dog, the man’s death is spoken of as inevitable because he ‘*cared too much* about their (animals) fulfilment and well-being.’ (317). To love another too much,

especially in the blurred human to animal relationship, is seen as a trait which will blind that being from protecting themselves and their own best interests.

Almost Pets

*'Like children, pets are not normally expected to perform any useful function.'*¹¹

Despite the emphasis given to the human-companion animal relationship, the term 'pet' holds negative connotations in MacLeod's stories of working farms and tough economic times. Animals are expected to have a function outside of supporting their owner's emotional or social needs, and are required to help generate income, rather than be a drain on it. One of the few pet dogs¹² which appear in MacLeod's work is the pit-bull of 'Clearances', who comes with the new neighbours to the area and symbolises everything the narrator despises about the effect of tourism on Cape Breton. This dog's defining qualities are exactly what a clan-based, farming society would not want in their dogs. As a pit-bull it could not perform any role as a farming dog, whilst its aggressive barks and repellent 'purple, bloated lips'(430), discourage any sense of community and friendship. The pit-bull wears a decorative collar of 'painted studs'(430) which supports its thuggish character and is another sign of its role as 'pet' rather than worker. The presence of a pet dog, brought in by the tourists to the area, is symbolic of the changing landscape of Cape Breton, as the area comes to rely more on tourism. Pets serve to entertain others, just as a tourist society seeks to meet the entertainment needs of its visitors.

To MacLeod's farming characters, for an animal to be called a 'pet' is a sign that it has lost its ability to fulfil its primary purpose as a working animal. The languishing physicality and wasted potential of these working animal 'pets' are symbols of the

¹¹ Serpell and Paul, p. 130.

¹² The dog at the beginning of 'Winter Dog' is a pet dog rather than working dog. The dogs of *No Great Mischief* are working dogs as well as family pets.

changing 20th century Cape Breton economy, as it moves away from the farming and fishing industries. The mare of ‘The Tuning for Perfection’, that is sold to the pharmaceutical company, is metaphorically dead long before her physical death, because she ‘never worked’ (287) as a farm horse. Her owner had not ‘been in the woods that much’ when she was young, and this lack of physical labour for the mare meant she became ‘more like a pet’(287). This idea of becoming a ‘pet’, as a form of working animal unemployment, is expanded on in ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’. The farm animals have become ‘almost pets’ (154) through disuse. The cows which graze on the family farm ‘seem wasted and unused’ because they are not being milked. The horse’s eyes and muscles are like ‘those of certain animals at the zoo...eyes and muscles that say *Yes, we are here and we are alive and we will eat our food, but we are not bred for this kind of life...look closely at us and you will see*’ (154). The economy of Cape Breton Island is changing, and MacLeod represents this as a kind of death of rural potential, as animals go to waste and old traditions die out with the passing generations.

(ii) A Dying Beast: Animal Symbolism

Margaret Atwood suggests that ‘animals in literature are always symbols’¹³and that in Canadian literature, the ‘Canadian projects himself through his animal images as a threatened victim, confronted by a superior alien technology against which he feels powerless, unable to take any positive defensive action, and, survive each crisis as he may, ultimately doomed’.¹⁴ Atwood is perhaps too sweeping in her claim that all animals must be representations of something *other*,¹⁵ and usually of the human psyche. But, undoubtedly, in MacLeod’s stories, dying or caged animals, in particular large powerful

¹³ Atwood, p. 75.

¹⁴ Atwood, p. 80.

¹⁵ Robert McKay notes that ‘Atwood’s assertion that animals are always symbols- that they can only bear anthropomorphic meaning ...makes it logically impossible to render the victimization of animals in literature.’ Robert McKay, ‘Language, Subjectivity, and Animal Politics in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*’, in *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 209- 227 (p. 219).

mammals like whales and bulls, are symbols of a doomed human culture in Cape Breton Island. The treatment and death of such animals are also representations of the impact which humans have when they try to dominate nature. Dogs in general are also linked to death and the hounds of 'As Birds Bring Forth the Son' draw on a particular Scottish folklore story. The use of such a myth speaks to the continued cultural ties to Scotland which MacLeod's characters have.

The Whale

Herman Melville writes that the whale's

...immense magnitude renders it very hard to believe that such bulky masses of overgrowth can possibly be instinct, in all parts, with the same sort of life that lives in a dog or a horse. ¹⁶

Melville was right in suggesting that there is something about whales which seems to mark them out as different to other animals. Their size and grace, and the human fascination with them, places them almost in the realm of the supernatural. Whales are 'beyond the normal, beyond what we expect in our daily lives'.¹⁷ Because of Nova Scotia's expansive coast lines, the province has a rich marine life, including whales. A whaling company was set up in Dartmouth in 1776 by Timothy Folger and (the intriguingly named) Samuel Starbuck. In *No Great Mischief*, the beaching of a whale becomes a symbol of both the dying Cape Breton Scottish culture, and an emblem of the demise of the Highland warrior character, Calum.

¹⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 2340.

¹⁷ Philip Hoare, *The Whale: In Search of The Giants of The Sea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 12.

As young men, Alexander and Calum spend an afternoon by a Cape Breton beach, enjoying the 'exuberant happiness' (NGM 93) of a nearby pod of pilot whales. The brothers engage with the whales, who responded to the humans' waving, shouting and singing, with 'magnificent response' (NGM 93). Alexander returns to the beach that evening to find one of the whales had become beached:

The tide was out and he lay his gigantic length upon the rocks, while the sea which was his element of grace lapped quietly some yards beyond him. Already the birds had pecked out his eyes and begun their work on his anus and his reproductive system. There was a jagged tear about five feet in length which ran from his throat through his stomach and down into his abdomen, and some of his internal organs had spilled out upon the rocks. (NGM 94)

The whale dies, and the next morning the brothers return to the beach. They find:

...in a cluster of glistening boulders, its internal organs, trapped by the boulders which the waves had rolled upon them, yet still fluctuating to the sea. The grey intestines coiled and sloshed, as did the liver and the stomach and the great, gigantic heart. Hundreds of yards inland, we later found the body itself...The sea had taken the body in instead of out, and it stayed there for more than a year until only its bones were visible to the eye. (NGM 95/96)

The layers of meaning and symbolism evoked in these passages are deserving of further exploration and analysis. The beautiful, powerful and majestic beast of the sea dies an undignified and prolonged death. The description is an autopsy-like report and record of the deceased and its injuries, noting the specifics of the grotesque scene by listing each of the 'glistening' internal organs which have been scattered from the carcass; the heart, liver, intestines. This objective and clear detailing of the death is more shocking to the reader than any amount of figurative allusions or superlatives. The reader is left in little doubt of the horror of the body on the beach.

‘Wisdom of the Ages’

The slow and drawn out death of the whale is a symbol of the gradual decline of the traditional, rural, way of life on Cape Breton Island. Whales have long been linked to islands. In the Old Testament story, Jonah is swallowed by a whale and then vomited up by the whale on to an island. In the first voyage of the Adventures of Sinbad, a large whale is mistaken by Sinbad for an island. As human attitudes towards whales have shifted from desiring to hunt to desiring to protect, whales have also come to be synonymous with that which is endangered; here the traditional culture of Cape Breton. The whale’s blindness is symbolic of the Island’s culture, which is unable to look towards the future and can only relive memories of past experiences. In the New Zealand novel *The Whale Rider*, the eyes of a dying whale are also linked to an endangered culture. As a rescuer looks into the eyes of a dying whale, he sees ‘the mana¹⁸ and wisdom of the ages shining like a sacred flame’.¹⁹ By looking into the eyes of the doomed whale, the rescuer is able to glimpse the defining elements of his Maori culture, which is in decline. In Sheldon Currie’s *The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum*, the pleading eyes of a whale as it is brutally beaten are linked to the plight of the Islanders’ coal miners. When a whale is beached on Glace Bay, many people rush to savagely harvest the meat, or ‘punch a hole in it ...filling a bottle full of blood’.²⁰ Neil, the character most proud of his Scottish ancestry, accosts a man who is spitting on the whale’s eye. When Neil’s brother-in-law Ian asks him why he cared, saying ‘It’s only a goddamn whale’, Neil replies ‘And you’re only a goddamn coal miner... It was just trying to live its life, when some asshole came along and spit in its eye.’²¹ Neil encourages Ian to see the analogues between the struggle of the whale and their own lives, which are at the mercy of the mining companies.

¹⁸ ‘Mana’ here refers to the strength, wisdom, pride and grace of the Maori people’s ancestors.

¹⁹ Witi Ihimaera, *The Whale Rider* (Auckland: Reed, 1987), p. 119.

²⁰ Sheldon Currie, *The Glace Bay Miners Museum* (Sydney, NS: Breton Books, 1995), p. 73.

²¹ Currie, p.78.

'Element of Grace'

Out of its 'element of grace' (94), the whale of *No Great Mischief* turns from a creature of aqueous beauty to a body of burden. As Philip Hoare notes, when whales are out of the water 'they collapse under their own weight, lacking limbs to support themselves, pathetically incapable of self-preservation despite, or because of, their great size'.²² As an environment of 'grace', the sea is a place of spirituality, peace, refuge and sanctuary. A simulated heart beat is created by 'the great gigantic heart...still fluctuating'(NGM 95) with the ebb and flow of the tide. With the sea as its life-force, the whale is able to 'live' after its physical death. In thinking about the Scottish Diaspora, the land-locked body and the sea-bound heart and soul of the whale illustrate the fractured identities and emotions of those who immigrated to Nova Scotia. Whilst the Scottish emigrants' bodies and bones lie in a new land, those who made the transatlantic voyage may still yearn for their own 'element of grace', Scotland; the place where their hearts and minds turn to in times of distress, and which, if only in memory, provides them with refuge and solace.

Having been tortuously castrated by the birds, the whale is stripped of its masculinity and the associated power which is associated with a large, male mammal. To be genderless is another stage in transitioning from living being, to a dead corpse; an object. As pilot whales are characterised by their instinct to follow a singular male leader, if this pilot whale was the pod's leader, his death represents the death of a whole pod in some sense, as their leader's absence would cause a lack of unity and direction. The whale is another figurative representation of the 'Highland Warrior' figure, of which Calum is the most recent incarnation. Calum remembers the 'whale' episode through 'the window of his imagination'(NGM 96) as he stands in his halfway house, in an elderly and addiction-

²² Hoare, p. 30.

riddled body he no longer can control. For the whale and for Calum: his 'body moved in land, but his great heart remained behind' (NGM 261). As Calum moves progressively further east; to the New Brunswick prison, and eventually the Toronto halfway house, his soul always remains in Cape Breton. Just as the whale has his genitals pecked off, so too is the masculinity and leadership of Calum is stripped by his arrest for killing Fern Picard, and his imprisonment. He is taken away from his 'pod', his miners and his clan, and deprived of the identity and mana which went with being the leader of the *Chalum Ruaidh* miners. Calum has spent most of his life away from his element of grace, Cape Breton. Calum's isolation from society for much of his life means he did not have children. The castration of the whale is a sign of the death of generations, and this is something particularly important in MacLeod's work, which is so keenly concerned with a lack of renewal and regeneration of the traditional culture which he sees as dying out.

Human Mastery and Animal Desire

The whale is a victim of its own instincts. Although Calum and Alexander blame themselves for acting like 'male sirens' (NGM 94) who lured it onto the rocks, the whale was brought to shallower waters either in search of food, or because of a misplaced sense of direction. In contrast to the whale, the treatment and death of the bull of 'In The Fall' calls into question the effect of human attempts to control animals, and manipulate their natural behaviour. Bulls are symbols of masculine sexuality and power. The bulls of 'The Return' and 'Second Spring' are 'moaning, dripping, frothing' (90) beasts of lust, who are resistant to human control. The bull's dominance of a cow in 'The Return' is 'both beautiful and terrible' (90) to the young boys who observe. The wild bull in 'Second Spring' is a juggernaut of lust, who charges like a 'lascivious, slobbering male' (239) at the farm cow and breaking down 'rotted, broken rails' (239) to get to his object of desire. In these instances, animal instinct and base desire is undeterred by any human barrier or controls. As a symbol of the natural world, the bull represents the continued

importance of rural and wild elements on Cape Breton, as the Island itself moves towards modernism.

For human power to dominate animal desire, the human must appropriate some of the animal's qualities. When the slaughter man MacRae traps the bull of 'In The Fall' in a horse float, he assumes the sexuality and dominance which is removed from the bull through this imprisonment. Shackled and bound by 'a rope that has been doubled through his nose ring and fastened to an iron bar bolted to the floor' (108) the bull is the condemned prisoner who is being transported to his death. The physical attributes which once would have made him a powerful figure of virility, his 'bulk' and 'massive shoulders'(108) , further encumber the bull's attempts to escape and make his body press at 'an unnatural angle to his grotesquely fastened head' (108). The bull's jailor, McRae, comments on the defining quality of the bull, his sexual power. McRae says to a young boy who is nearby: 'How'd you like to have a pecker like that fella? Bet he's had his share and driven it into them little heifers a good many times.' (108) McRae's comments equate the animal instinct with human sexual desire, as the bull's 'pecker' is something which the young boys should envy or aspire to have. He adds 'Boy, you get hung like that, you'll have all them horny little girls squealin' (108). The 'girls' become the 'heifers' in McRae's vulgar comments. Although the bull is the larger, stronger animal, McRae gains a status as the dominant sexual animal in the scene both through physically trapping the bull, and through linking the animal's natural instincts to the pre-pubescent thoughts of the young boys. He later 'begins to urinate in the alleyway'(109) near the horse float, and this act of publically exposing his own penis completes his appropriation of the bull's strength and power. McRae becomes the 'alpha male' in the scene, suggesting that for humans to assume power in the animal, natural world they must do so by a 'linear' exchange of power and strength, rather than assuming it simply by being the

species which domesticates, rather than is domesticated. Human mastery over animals in a domesticated realm is not guaranteed.

Black Dogs

In the Ian McEwan novel *Black Dogs*, the character June recalls an attack by two semi-mythical dogs. She thinks of the assumed relationship between humans and domesticated animals, a ‘certain irreducible respect owed by dogs to humans...founded on the unquestionable facts of human intelligence and dog stupidity’,²³ and how this kind of human-domesticated animal contract was not present in her encounter with the wild dogs; ‘the rules were exposed as mere convention, a flimsy social contract. Here, no institutions asserted human ascendancy’.²⁴ The human interactions with the bulls which MacLeod details, even the doomed bull and McRae, also illustrate that to assume human ascendancy over animals when they are in ‘human realms’, like farms, is false. The dogs which June is remembering are mythical beasts, and death omens, much like the dogs of ‘As Birds Bring Forth the Sun’. As the present world which MacLeod’s characters inhabit changes, and they increasingly ‘turn to the past’ (such as discussed in Chapter 1), it is fitting that MacLeod evokes mythical animals which are themselves from another place and time.

The dog of ‘As Birds Bring Forth The Sun’ is referred to as ‘*cu mor glas*, the big grey dog’ (312). The dog is likened to a canine banshee, like a ‘staghound from another time’ (310) which is believed to have been ‘part of a *buidseachd* or evil spirit cast on the man by some mysterious enemy’ (316). After the dog’s owner is killed by her puppies, his children and descendents are haunted by spectres of grey hounds in various guises, and

²³ Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 147.

²⁴ McEwan, p. 147.

almost always see the *cu mor glas a'bhais* (the big grey dog of death) (319) in some form soon before they die. In European folklore, the 'black dogs' are supernatural dogs which are believed to roam the countryside, and 'they are believed to herald disaster of some kind, communal or personal, usually the latter.'²⁵ The 'black dog' myth takes various forms. In Welsh folklore, it is the Hounds of Annwn, grey ghost dogs who foretell death, and in Irish folklore Mac Da Tho, an Underworld deity, possesses a large hound.²⁶ MacDonald has drawn on the Scottish 'Grey Dog of Meoble'²⁷ strain of the story, which tells a very similar tale to 'As Birds'. A young Highlander farmer, Dougal MacDonald, who lived in a remote part of the Highlands, 'immediately west of Glen Pean and Glendessary'²⁸ is said to have raised a large deerhound. The hound left for a remote island to have her pups, and when MacDonald visited the island, he was killed by the pups. The pups were hunted and killed by the man's family and the hound, heartbroken at her master's death, died lying on his grave. By dying at her master's grave, the dog of the Meoble myth becomes more 'loyal pet' than she-wolf, and the story has a sense of completion. In MacLeod's retelling of the myth, the dog and her pups are not caught and continue to roam the island.

The hound and her puppies in MacLeod's story are never seen again, and they become an emblem of the mystical and the ghostly. They exist in the realm of the 'half perceived' (316), as beasts which are 'seen but not recorded' (316), flickering in the background of each new life and constantly threatening to appear, like the 'spirit hounds' of McEwan's

²⁵ Theo Brown, 'The Black Dog in English Folklore', in *Animals In Folklore*, ed. by J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russell (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 1978), pp. 45-58 (p. 57).

²⁶ Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 186.

²⁷ Mike Dash, 'The Grey Dog of Meoble', in *A Blast From The Past* <<https://allkindsofhistory.wordpress.com/2010/07/24/the-grey-dog-of-meoble/>> [accessed 25th April 2011]. For a Cape Breton-specific reference to the story, see: John Shaw, *The Blue Mountains and other Gaelic Stories from Cape Breton* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), p. 181.

²⁸ John Graham Gibson, *Old World and New World Highland Bagpiping* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), p. 318.

novel which appear to characters ‘on the retina in the giddy seconds before sleep’.²⁹ For the descendants of the farmer, the dogs are ‘a cultural link between old and new’³⁰ which link them back to their rural ancestor. As they go about their lives in Montreal or in Toronto, they are bound by the fear and knowledge that one day they too will see the ‘grey dog of death’ (320). The original farmer had a ‘Highland name, who lived by the sea’ (310), but it is not stated where or at what time period he lived. It is possible that MacLeod intends the original farmer to be a reference to mythical Dougal MacDonald of Meikle, Scotland, on whom the original Scottish ‘grey dog’ myth is based, and thus the story becomes an even longer tentacle from the past which stretches forward into the modern lives of the 20th century family and pulls them back into the superstitions and communal knowledge.

The hound of death runs throughout MacLeod’s stories, as dogs are repeatedly linked to, or have a special knowledge, of their owner’s deaths. The witch-like blind elderly woman of ‘Visions’ is guarded by a pair of demonic ‘black dogs’ (335) with eyes that seemed to ‘burn in the gloom’ (335). The woman and the ‘savage faithful dogs’ die in a mysterious house fire; the dogs ‘snarling at the doorway, with their fur in flames’ (352). The dog of ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ is said to have reacted violently at the exact moment his mistress died in a car accident, in another part of the country. The dog ‘runned around like he was crazy...throwen hisself against the walls’(135). The grandmother of ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’ knew her husband had died because she heard the distant, distressed calls of her husband’s dogs and ‘comprehended the message that their anguished voices bore’(149). This line is repeated when the woman herself dies, and her grandson knows from the ‘message that (the dogs’) anguished voices bear’ (177) that his grandmother has died.

²⁹ McEwan, p. 174.

³⁰ Davies, p. 122.

The 'Bi-Lingual' Collie

The dog of 'Clearances' dies with its owner and their deaths are symbols of the endangered Scottish culture of Cape Breton Island. As with the horses of 'Rankin', the dog has become more of a pet than farm dog as a result of the island's changing economy and the move away from farming. The narrator is mournful that he has 'denied (his border collie) dog his heritage by no longer keeping sheep or livestock' (424). The dog itself though is a link not just to Cape Breton's farming past, but also to the Scottish heritage of the Islanders. The narrator speaks to his 'bilingual' dog in Gaelic because he believes doing so 'preserved a link to his own and his animal's ancestral past' (423). He says to it: '*S'è thu fhein a tha tapaidh* (It is yourself that is smart)' (419). This phrase is a repeat of the phrase the narrator heard his friend, the Highland shepherd, say to his own border collie, when the pair first met in Scotland. The narrator endeavoured to bring something of the sense of belonging and friendship he had experienced in Scotland, to his own life in Cape Breton, by breeding border collies in the likeness of the Highland shepherd's Gaelic-commanded dog. The narrator breeds the collies, prized for their 'specialness', from a 'detailed breeding chart' sent to him by the Highland shepherd (412). This attempt to recreate something of 'pure' Scotland in Cape Breton is a futile effort in the face of societal changes that MacLeod's characters are experiencing in 20th century Cape Breton. The narrator feels increasingly outdated and redundant in his own homeland. The arrival of the pitbull with its painted collar and aggressive behaviour is the final sign to the narrator that he, his dog and their shared Scottish heritage are no longer relevant in their small island community. The dog's own blood line dies out as the dog steps with its owner over a cliff. By projecting so much importance on to the lineage and heritage of the dog, the narrator makes his 'bi-lingual' dog part of the mystic and unseen 'homeland' which he longs for. The man and his dog 'both took a step forward at the same time' (431) and die thinking of a place where they belong. The life of MacLeod's

animals is intertwined with life on Cape Breton Island. As the animals die, so does the traditional way of life which they embody.

Chapter Four - Burdening Bodies: *Death*

It is appropriate that the narrator of 'Clearances' embarks on his final journey to death, with his greatest friend, the 'bi-lingual' dog. Neither is faced with mourning the loss of their companion, because they die together. Much of Macleod's writing on death focuses on those who mourn the deceased. He writes of death with a brutal honesty, and consideration is given to both the role of the corpse in the traditional mourning rituals of the Islanders, and also the reality of coping with a corpse in isolated areas. Tragic, violent deaths of young people populate MacLeod's stories of miners, fisherman and farmers. These deaths, of those who work in the traditional, physical occupations of Cape Breton, are compared to the deaths of those who have sought urban lives and more modern occupations. The importance of clan and family loyalty is depicted through blood imagery, and the redness of blood is contrasted with the whiteness of snow in descriptions of deaths that occur in the cold of Cape Breton winters. MacLeod's writing moves to consider the metaphorical, as frozen bodies are used to comment on the nature of memorialisation. As characters move from life to death, light imagery is used to illustrate the characters' emotional connections to both Cape Breton, and the ancestral homeland of Scotland.

Called Home To Mourn

On MacLeod's Cape Breton Island, a death is marked by the collective grief of the whole community. Clan members are 'called home by a death in the family' (NGM 49) and make the 'long homeward journeys' (187) across Canada to mourn the loss together. Whereas travelling home for a wake would once have been by buggy ride or a boat trip, the out-migration of Islanders to urban areas across North America means that now the families wait anxiously by the telephone for the sign to start their cars and begin the long drive east, holding tense discussions of '*If he dies tonight, we'll leave right away*'

and ‘*We’ll have to drive as we’ll never get an air reservation at this time*’ (251). Once home, the extended family gathers in the house of the deceased, sleeping in ‘chairs, in the hallway, on the floor in bedrooms’ (NGM 49). They are crushed together physically as a mark of their shared grief. The death of Colin as a child, in *No Great Mischief*, brings back so many of his clansmen from the mines that there are ‘more than enough men to dig the grave’ ‘passing the pick from one to the other’, and each ‘watching the sparks fly from the frozen earth’(NGM 48). Their shared burden of creating the grave becomes another act of collectively mourning, whilst the oversupply of young, strong men to dig the grave emphasises the smallness and innocence of the tiny body which is being buried.

The gathering of the clan together acknowledges the loss of life and sadness felt at a death, but also the love that those still living felt for the deceased. The wake of Colin in *No Great Mischief* is made all the more poignant because his parents are not there, and mourners are not able to comfort those to whom the loss has been the greatest. When visitors attend Colin’s wake, they ‘looked instinctively for my parents, because it was the parents that one turned to when a child was lost’ (NGM 48). The shared grief is an acknowledgement of the love felt for the deceased and when a death is not publicly mourned it suggests that the deceased was not fully part of the community. In both *No Great Mischief* and ‘Island’, a young local woman forms a secret relationship with a visiting summer labourer. The young woman discovers she is pregnant after her lover has left Cape Breton. In each story, the young woman finds out second-hand that her lover has been killed in an industrial accident. The woman of ‘Island’ is told that ‘that young man...was killed in the woods this winter...in the skidway’(386). Likewise in *No Great Mischief*, the mother of Grandfather is casually told that her lover was killed ‘in January...crushed beneath the logs on the skidway’ (NGM 29). Neither of these deaths is publicly mourned, as they were both of young men who were seen as outsiders in the Cape Breton communities in which they meet their lovers. The young men are not given

a public recognition of the end of their lives, and of the loss which their deaths create in the lives of those who love them.

In keeping with the Scottish heritage of many of the characters, the body of the deceased is laid out, in 'living rooms and old-fashioned parlours' for the days leading up to, and for the duration of the 'two or three day' (187) wakes. During this period, mourners share the job of sitting up with the body for 'long all night vigils' (187) so that the dead are never without a living, and awake, member of their family. The body here is treated as a sacred representation of the deceased, and mourners speak with and sing to the corpse. Those who sat 'all night beside the corpse of my brother Colin' did so that 'he would not be alone' (NGM 49). It is a custom described by Elizabeth Bishop in 'First Death in Nova Scotia' when she writes: 'In the cold, cold parlour/ my mother laid out Arthur'.¹ The body may look as though it is at peace, and this can provide comfort to those mourning. This custom is also carried out by the descendents of Scottish emigrants who sought new lives in places other than Canada. In the New Zealand short story 'The Garden Party' by Katherine Mansfield, the body of a young man who dies is laid out in his home. A mourner who visits the body sees that 'his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream...All is well, said the sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.'²

The peacefully resting corpse allows those who are left behind to imagine that the death itself was peaceful. In MacLeod's work, the deaths are frequently the result of violent accidents, but if the body is 'no longer recognisable to those who knew and loved' (NGM 117) the deceased, then a closed casket protects the family's memory of their loved one: 'Only memories and youthful photographs recall the physical reality that lies so

¹ Bishop, 'First Death in Nova Scotia', pp. 125-126 (pp. 125-126).

² Katherine Mansfield, 'The Garden Party', in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), pp. 197- 210 (pp. 209-210).

dismembered and disturbed within each grey sealed coffin.’ (187) The corpse is mourned because of what it symbolises, the life that has been lost, but modern attitudes to death make the corpse itself something that the mourners want to know little about. Once the body is entombed, it becomes macabre and taboo. It is these attitudes which Margaret of Sheldon Currie’s *The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum* challenges when she pays tribute to the memory of her grandfather, brother and husband, who all died from mining, by bottling their body parts with ‘each thing in its own pickle jar’.³ As someone whose life has been intertwined with deaths caused by mining, Margaret is under no illusions as to the peacefulness of death and the sacredness of a mourned body.

Like Margaret, the miners who work with the threat of a violent death each day are not able to have a sanitised and privileged view on death and bodies. The body of red-haired Alexander is lowered ‘into the grave by the hands of the men who worked with him underground’(NGM 119). The bodies which worked beside him in his life now work together to create the final shaft he will enter. In ‘The Closing Down of Summer’ the metaphorical collision of mining and grave digging is literalised. The narrator describes digging a grave for his brother, killed in the mines, in the family plot. The ‘wall gave way and it sent the box that contained my father’s coffin sliding down upon us. He had been dead for five years then, blown apart in the Kirkland lake’ (190). The narrator is physically trapped between the two bodies of his family members killed by the mine. This movement of his father’s remains brings back old memories and grief: ‘the rotting relics of the past portions of our lives’ (190). He thinks of the corpse of his brother that was retrieved from the mine, a body with ‘eyes bulged in his head and the fluids of his body seeped quietly into the glistening rocks’ (188). Witnessing the violent death of their co-workers is an occupational hazard for those who work in the mines, and they are

³ Currie, *The Glace Bay Miners Museum*, p. 127.

constantly aware of the grotesque reality of a corpse after it has been killed by physical trauma.

A Grisly Burden

It is not just the miners of Cape Breton who become intimately aware of the physical burden a dead body can be. MacLeod captures the desperation of families in extremely isolated areas, often small islands, to treat the corpse as a sacred symbol of their deceased loved one, whilst they must also deal with it as a large decomposing object which must be moved to a burial ground. When the grandfather in 'The Road To Rankin's Point' dies out on an icy road, the corpse becomes a 'grisly burden' (150) to be dealt with by his widow and young children. They are confronted with his 'frozen open eyes' and 'grotesquely parted purple lips with protruding tongue' (150) and must move him themselves in the night, to avoid the body being attacked by animals. The family cannot find any way of moving the body other than a 'children's coasting sleigh' which is so small that the 'legs and the heels dragged along the jagged, stony road' so that the heels of the rubber boots of the corpse 'wore through to the frozen flesh' (150). The use of a child's toy to move the body highlights the loss of innocence the children are undergoing, in being forced to take part in such a task. The smallness of the sleigh magnifies the size of the body it carries, which is bound to the sleigh with 'lengths of rope' (150). The image is like a macabre enactment of Gulliver being roped down by the Lilliputians. The family's memory of their father and provider is defiled as first his boots, and then his skin and flesh, are worn away by the icy road along which the body is dragged. Unlike those dignified mourners who look piously on the perfectly laid-out bodies of their deceased loved ones, families like the Rankin family must first move the physical burden of a body before they can mourn their emotional loss. For the young, pregnant widow, the immediacy with which the body must be dealt with removes any time for shock or self-pity. The grim task of moving her husband's body becomes the first of many tasks she

must endure alone. As an isolated Islander, she must first cope with her duties and physical tasks, before attending to her personal grief.

The widow of 'Island' must also cope with the corpse of her dead husband, before she can mourn his loss of life. The husband dies hauling his fishing boat to shore, and as the widow is not able to refloat the boat, she and her children are trapped on the island with the body they must get to the mainland. The family collect the body and stage their own version of laying the body out for viewing in the house: 'stretching his body out on a kitchen table...covering it with a white sheet' (373), but careful that the room does not become too warm. Poor weather conditions mean that the body must stay in the kitchen for three days, a similar length of time to a wake. The family launch a small skiff with the body onboard, and as they row desperately towards the mainland, they light a burning tub at the 'prow of the skiff' (374) to attract attention. In this act, they create an ad hoc Viking ship burial for the man. As with laying out the body, their actions are motivated through trying to dispose of the physical burden, but they in fact mirror some of the customs and traditions seen when a body is treated as a sacred object to be mourned.

In 'As Birds Bring Forth The Sun' the pragmatism and practicalities of dealing with a body in isolated conditions are further illustrated. The sons of the man killed by the wild puppies are forced to huddle beside their father's mangled corpse to stay warm, as they spend the night on the island due to rough weather conditions. The following morning they are able to 'drag, carry and almost float him' back to their boat, where the body is 'laid face down' and covered with 'what clothes were there'(315). Like the family of 'Island', the sons instinctively act out the preparation of a body for mourning and burial. Their desire to cover and protect the body illustrates that, despite being forced to use the body as an object of survival, they still strive to treat it with dignity. Even on the island,

the boys do not want 'to leave it unattended'(315) and thus re-enact the ritual of sitting with the newly deceased. When they do consider leaving the body to go for help, they know they will need time 'to cover it with protective rocks'(315) . Although this is a practical act, it is also a link to the Gaelic tradition of building a cairn, a construction of stone, which has symbolic meaning, such as a memorial to a deceased person. Through such episodes, MacLeod forces the reader to see death, and the bodies, in a more pragmatic and much less sterilised way than they are treated in modern society. The corpses occupy a 'limbo' space between being the sacred remains of a deceased love one, and another object to be moved as part of their daily physical labour.

Survivor's Guilt

The premature deaths of young and fit people, such as the young fathers of 'Rankin' and 'Island' are depicted as shocking and unsettling for those who mourn them, and MacLeod creates this shock in the reader by describing these deaths with brutal and graphic honesty. In contrast, the expected deaths of the elderly are depicted as gentle and very little description of the death or the body is provided. The elderly wife of 'Clearances' dies in her sleep 'without a sound or a shudder' (414) and the mother in 'Birds' slips away 'as quietly as a grown up child who leaves...her parent's house in the early hours' (319). In 'Island', the death of an elderly widow, soon after her husband's death, 'had no physical explanation' but was 'like certain animals who pass away without their mates' (395). The quiet deaths of the elderly reaffirm the idea that death is the natural, peaceful conclusion to a long life. But the unforeseen, violent or accidental deaths of the young are 'so sudden' 'so unexpected' that those who are left to mourn are without 'any place to turn. Nothing to grasp nor to hold on to' (NGM 119). These deaths contradict the comforting notion, suggested by the deaths of the elderly, that there is a linear progression from a well-lived life to a meaningful or peaceful death. The narrator from 'Clearances' is so shocked by the accidental death of his 'strong, athletic son', because, like most parents, the narrator

'had not expected to outlive his children' (422). Likewise, the death of a woman in childbirth is disturbing because for the creation of life to lead to death seems so illogical. The grandfather of *No Great Mischief* laments that he had a part in his wife's death in childbirth, thinking that had he 'not impregnated her she would not have died in childbirth' (NGM 211). Whereas the quiet deaths of the elderly seem natural, the deaths of the young leave those left behind looking for answers which will give these tragic early deaths some meaning.

The search for meaning in a tragic death can manifest itself in the mourners as guilt, anger, and a tendency to over-romanticise the memory of the person who has died. The death of his wife in childbirth causes Archibald to feel 'guilt for his wife...his daughters' (278). At times this guilt becomes anger at his wife, the kind of 'survivor's anger' of those left to deal with the pain of grief when a loved one dies. He 'could not believe that she had somehow gone without him' (277). For Alexander of *No Great Mischief*, his guilt at the death of his cousin and childhood rival, who died in the mines the day that Alexander graduated and secured a life of professional work, leads him to over-sentimentalise his cousin's life. Alexander thinks of his dead cousin in terms taken from the Book of Wisdom, as the 'virtuous man...he died before his life'.⁴ These emotions, of guilt and romanticism, show the privileged position that these mourners are in. Like those who do not have to deal with the physicality of a corpse, these mourners are able to indulge in such emotional questioning because they themselves are not in any physical threat. In contrast, the miner of 'Closing' does not allow himself to have any emotional or theoretical perspective or reflection on death, because he is himself always teetering on the brink of his own accidental death. When the miner remembers the death of his brother in the mines, it is deliberately without guilt or sentiment: 'I don't think much of death...for if I am to survive I must be as careful and calculated with my thoughts as I am

⁴ Book of Wisdom 4. 7-15.

with my tools...always careful of sloppiness and self-indulgence lest they cost me dearly in the end' (203). Death is an ever-present and real threat to the miner, and to dwell on his brother's death would be to adopt a thought-space which would endanger his own life. As a miner, he lives, and may well die, in a physical realm which allows for little over-analysing or sentimentalising.

'Fatly Affluent'

The physical jobs that require working closely with the land, such as mining, fishing and farming, are presented in MacLeod's stories as tough, but meaningful occupations. Real men live and die by the land. But 'the pencil and the telephone replace the broken, dangling reins and the marlinespike' (161) and the sons of Cape Breton are increasingly pursuing non-physical occupations, away from the land. These modern men and their soft occupations experience deaths that are as self-indulgent and meaningless as their lives. The move towards less physical occupations is often linked to the negative effects of out-migration and the loss of the traditional culture. The young professional men who marry the daughters of the family in 'The Boat' are viewed by the mother as representing 'the lazy, the effeminate, the dishonest and the unknown' (16). The men's lack of physical work and knowledge of the land, means the mother cannot understand their role in society, and dismisses them as contributing nothing of value. Likewise, the deaths of such professional men are seen as being the person's own fault, rather than a noble passing of men who die in 'accidental ways that grew out of their lives' (160), after lives that were 'as intensely physical as the deaths' (160).

The grandmother of 'Rankin' has outlived two successive generations of young men, her three brothers and her three sons, all of whom died accidentally. The brothers 'fell into the teeth of a mowing machine', died from 'a storm at sea' or frozen on the ice 'when the

sealing ship became separated from its men' (160). The deaths of these men are linked to their work. They lived hard, physically demanding, industrial jobs, which were intimately connected to the land. The deaths of the younger generation, the three sons, are the result of living lives of affluence and physical comfort. Their deaths are caused by mortal sin and over-indulgence, from gluttony 'choked on a piece of steak in an expensive Montreal restaurant', from laziness 'from too much sun', and from vanity by 'jogging through the streets of Mississauga at five A.M' (161). These sons of warriors and labourers, 'over 6 feet tall'(163) now are 'far removed from the physical life'(199) and pay gyms for the 'pleasures of perspiration' (198). There is an 'ironic feeling of confused bereavement'(199) in the sons of miners and fishermen who fill the law offices and dentist clinics of urban centres, but are cut off from their own cultures. They physically languish 'behind desks'(198) and become 'fatly affluent'(198) from occupations which deal in thought and abstract ideas, but require no physical exertion. Their hands, which are central to the working life of any farmer, fisherman or miner become mutilated in a different way to the mangled hands of their cousins who work the land. The fatly affluent men have 'pudgy fingers' (198), which serve as markers of the distance between their current lives (and subsequent deaths) and their labouring heritage.

'Always Protect Your Blood'

Alexander is keenly aware that his 'hands have grown soft' from his professional life, having spent a career 'exploring the insides of other people's mouths' (NGM 169). He thinks of his brothers and cousins, who have lead physical working lives, as heroes. They are men who sacrificed their own lives and shed their blood to protect their people. Blood imagery is associated with Calum and the MacDonald patriarch Mac Ian as discussed in Chapter 2. The cousin, red-haired Alexander, who is decapitated in a mining accident, is also linked to Mac Ian through narrator Alexander's thinking that for both men 'the redness of his hair (is) dyed forever brighter by the crimson of his blood' (NGM

113). Mac Ian, Alexander's cousin and Calum all spill their blood in clan conflicts and thus live up to the *Chalum Ruaidh* clan maxim to 'always look after your own blood' (NGM 12). Mac Ian is killed in protecting his family; cousin Alexander's death is rumoured to be an attack on the *Calum Ruadh* miners by the Québécois miners; and Calum's face is 'covered in blood' (NGM 237) after he fights and kills Fern Picard in a brawl between the clan and the Québécois miners. In Alexander's imagining of his relatives, their blood and their memory take on a kind of reverence because of their actions. The memories of these dead clansmen are 'forever brighter' in the eyes of the living because of the heroic way they died, and they become Christ-like figures. The blood that flows from a cut on Calum's head, which 'seems to follow the contours of his face, as the mountain river follows the land' (NGM 7) becomes like Christ's stigmata; the signs of the physical sacrifices he has made in protecting his clan. When Calum returns home to die, the 'thin scar' on his lower lip can be seen in the darkness of the night 'whitening' (NGM 261). Only in death do the scars of these heroes finally heal.

The father in 'The Boat' is another Christ-like figure. The death of the father, which is described with MacLeod's characteristic 'factual accuracy and understated horror'⁵, frees the son from a life of physical drudgery. The father goes overboard from the boat on a fishing expedition, and the son instantly knows that the father 'would never be again' (23). It is ambiguous as to whether the death was deliberate. The father's body is found several days after he drowns, and he is described in similar terms to the drowned Phoenician Sailor in *The Waste Land*, who is a 'fortnight dead'.⁶ The father's hands were 'shredded ribbons', his 'shoulders came apart in our hands', 'fish had eaten his testicles' and his face was a 'bloated, purple mass' (25). He has become like the Phoenician Sailor with

⁵ Francis Berces, 'Existential Maritimer: Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 16. 1 (1991)

<http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol16_1/&filename=Berces.htm> [accessed 24th April 2011], (para. 11 of 27).

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 61-80 (p. 75, l. 312).

‘those pearls that were his eyes...a current under sea/ Picked his bones in whispers’⁷. The only personal artefact on the body is the father’s ‘brass chains on his wrist’ (25). By dying, the father has broken his own ‘chains’ of a life of physical hardship, and he has also released his son from the ‘chain of tradition’(4) which the son took on when he reluctantly agreed to carry on the family fishing legacy, for as long as his father lived.

‘Blood-stained Ice’

Shortly before Calum MacDonald dies, after returning home to Cape Breton, he and Alexander see bald eagles ‘pounce with mighty talons upon the white-coated baby seals. They will scream in different voices as they rise upon the blood-stained ice’ (NGM 261). Blood imagery is strongly associated with ice in those deaths where the harsh elements of the outdoors have defeated the human. Calum of ‘Rankin’ thinks of his grandfather who died when he slipped on an icy road and his blood was ‘the brightest scarlet, staining the moon-white snow as the joyous rabbits leaped and pirouetted beneath the pale, clear moon’ (148). This description is unusual in MacLeod’s stories as it uses poetic language to describe the incongruously ‘joyous’ rabbits. The moon-lit, bloodied death has the air of a pagan ritual, in which the man is sacrificed to nature in order that his family and descendant may occupy their remote part of the Island. Christian imagery is drawn on as Calum imagines his grandfather’s ‘blood, hot and sweet and instantly converted like sweet and boiling maple syrup, upon the winter’s snow’ (160). The snow causes a form of transubstantiation, as the liquid blood of the dead man, with alcohol surging through from the rum he was drinking, congeals and becomes tacky, alluding to wine becoming the blood of Christ. Blood and ice imagery is likewise seen in the description of the wounded Scottish soldiers who return from the epic battle at Killiecrankie detailed in *No Great Mischief*. The soldiers have been defeated in battle, and walk through a harsh winter blizzard with ‘bleeding stumps’ where limbs used to be. They have been castrated,

⁷ Eliot, l. 315-316.

with ‘bleeding between the legs’ (NGM 84). Against this background of snow and blood, they revert to animalistic behaviour. In a crazed, starved state savagely attempt to reclaim their wounded masculinity through acting out ‘hunter’ behaviour, by killing a deer and ‘lapping the blood and gnawing the raw meat of the slaughtered winter deer’ (NGM 85). The men take in blood in the snow, as the blood of the ‘Rankin’ men seeps away in the snow. For MacLeod’s characters, blood and snow are representations of life and death and the nearness with which they live to nature.

‘No One Can Own The Sea’

Death in MacLeod’s work is often caused by the extreme weather conditions and unpredictable environment of the Island. David Creelman argues that the natural world in MacLeod’s stories is presented as a force ‘unrelenting, dangerous and devouring. The raging seas and unstable mines manifest the force of chaos’.⁸ This statement suggests that MacLeod’s stories illustrate the ‘Death by Nature’ motif, that Margaret Atwood describes as being prolific in Canadian Literature, in which the great Canadian outdoors is the aggressor which works against the country’s human occupants. But as Atwood says ‘Nature is a monster, perhaps, only if you come to it with unreal expectations or fight its conditions rather than accepting them and learning to live with them.’⁹ In MacLeod’s stories, nature is a fact of life. It is a force which is not glamourised, and the characters rarely speak of it as willingly malevolent. MacLeod’s work is not full of descriptions of vile winds or cruel seas. The forces of nature are part of life in MacLeod’s Cape Breton, and living with and dying by such extremities is in the blood of his characters.

⁸ Creelman, ‘“Hoping to Strike Some Solidity”’, p. 83.

⁹ Atwood, p. 66.

The sea brings the isolation and remoteness which forms the Islanders' identity and the Atlantic Ocean becomes almost a character itself in MacLeod's work. As Kirsty Gunn says, in *No Great Mischief* and many of the short-stories 'all the vulnerability, the isolation of human life comes to be played out in terms of the merciless icy water'.¹⁰

The Islanders' lives focus around their interactions with the sea, as noted in the discussion of boat journeys in Chapter 1. A death by drowning, in which the body is lost at sea, leaves those who mourn the loss with a sense of incompleteness. Characters long for loved ones who have drowned at sea, thinking of them as the 'vanished people' who might 'rise from the sea' (NGM 51), hoping that 'the sea gave up all the dead that were in it' (NGM 119). The suggestion is that those who drown at sea, with their bodies that are not recovered, are not really 'dead', but are rather being held hostage in some watery prism and that if they could break free or be released they would return to their families. Those bodies which are recovered from watery deaths bear the marks of 'nature's ability to bend and warp the vulnerable human'.¹¹ The narrator of 'The Boat' remarks that 'there was not much left of my father' (25) when his remains were discovered because the 'relentless waves' (23) had destroyed the body. In the shipwreck in 'Winter Dog', the sea gives up 'bodies of the men swept overboard and reported lost at sea, and bodies of men still crouched within the shelter of their boats' broken bows' (258). In their dying moments, the men illustrate their infant-like vulnerability by assuming the foetal positions as they try to protect themselves. Similarly the shipwreck survivors of 'Island' who emerge from the water, but die from 'exposure and starvation' (375), 'huddled under trees or outcrops of rock in the positions of their death' (375). As the narrator of 'The Boat' says: 'no one can own the sea' (24); it is an indiscriminate force which the Islanders live in the shadow of.

¹⁰ Kirsty Gunn, *44 Things: A Year of Life at Home* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 297.

¹¹ David Creelman, *Setting In The East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), p. 129.

The cold and snow are inescapable parts of life, and death, for the rural characters of MacLeod's Cape Breton. As MacLeod himself states: 'There is *nowhere* in Canada where you couldn't freeze to death in February.'¹² His characters are at the mercy of the winter snow, which becomes an anthropomorphised spectre of death, who creeps into the lives of the characters and quietly takes away loved ones. In 'The Tuning of Perfection' Archibald remembers how the death in childbirth of his wife and infant son meant they were 'taken into the winter snow' (278), just as the brother in 'Island', walked out into a blizzard one day and 'vanished like his tracks, beneath the winter snow' (392). The white of the snow becomes the pallor of death, which the wife in 'Rankin' gazes at when she looks across the 'death-white field'(148) after her husband dies on the ice, one wintry night. Although the 'environment is not demonised'¹³ in MacLeod's works, it is a force which can neither be controlled nor predicted by humans, whose lives and deaths are centred around the whims of seasons and elements.

Frozen Perfection

Margaret Atwood suggests that 'The Canadian author's two favourite "natural" methods for dispatching of his victims are drowning and freezing'.¹⁴ In the deaths of Colin MacDonald and his parents, MacLeod has combined both these classic Canadian 'deaths by nature.' In contrast to the bloodied hands and torn-away throats, the gurgling sounds and bodily fluids which characterise many of the deaths in MacLeod's work, the corpse of Colin is perfectly preserved. Colin's body is pulled frozen from the ice 'with the drawstrings of his hood still tied and tucked beside his throat'(NGM 47) as his mother had done when he put the coat on. The garment which his mother laid on him is still in place, as if she, herself now dead, prepared the body of her son for his funeral. Colin lies with 'perfect stillness...but with that type of perfection that still seems somehow to be in

¹² MacLeod, qtd. in Nicholson, 'Signatures of Time', p. 196.

¹³ Creelman, ' "Hoping to Strike Some Solidity" ', p. 91.

¹⁴ Atwood, p. 54.

waiting' (NGM 49). Unlike the bodies which are hauled by family members through ice, or winched up a mine shaft, Colin's body has not changed dramatically from the form it took in life. The ice has captured the exact moment of death, and holds the body in this transformative state, giving an appearance of perfection. It is neither living person, nor dead corpse but something in between, 'waiting' to change, suggesting an incompleteness in the process of 'person becoming object' which is so widely considered in MacLeod's stories.

The death of the MacDonald parents on the ice, with Colin, has an even greater sense of incompleteness because their bodies are never recovered. Alexander imagines his parents:

...upside down beneath the ice. Almost the way you see potato bugs on the underside of the leaf. Their hands and knees pushing upwards in something resembling a macabre foetal position, trying to press their mouths against the underside of the top which kept them down. Trying to breath in order that they might somehow stay alive. (NGM 51)

This image is as beautiful as it is horrific. In death, the parents assume a pre-birth, 'macabre foetal' state. They float, in the foetal position, in the ice which is an inverted womb image, a place of life-taking rather than life giving with the freezing water the opposite of warm amniotic fluid. The drowning pair desperately 'press their mouths against the top' like babies attempting to suckle. The parents die as helpless as new born children. Without the recovery of the bodies, the family are left only with their memories of the parents in life, and their imagination of what form their bodies took in death. The family have been spared the trauma of dealing with a body, yet it is exactly this lack of a physical object to mourn which Alexander is so haunted by. Without his parents' bodies to lay out and bury, 'Alexander was denied the ability to symbolise the nature of his

loss'.¹⁵ There is a need for *a* body to be discovered for the death to seem complete for the bereaved. It is the act of seeing a corpse, or knowing that there has been a corpse sighted by others, which allows the mourners to understand that the 'body' they knew as a person has become an object, albeit an object which is grieved over.

The frozen perfection which is so transfixing to Alexander when he looks at the body of his brother Colin is also present in the frozen carcass of a seal which captures the attention of the narrator in 'Winter Dog'. The seal was 'facing us in frozen perfection. Its eyes were wide open...as if it were transformed by frozen art into something more arresting than life itself. The way the sudden seal in the museum freezes your eyes with the touch of truth' (260). The reader is drawn into this altered reality through the uncharacteristic use of the second person pronoun. The two images which this simile uses are inversions of each other. The 'eyes' of the frozen seal, the object which is looked upon, transfix the narrator just as the 'eyes' of the museum-goer, the viewer of the object, become 'frozen' by the sight of the museum seal. The snowy conditions in which the dead seal is found 'creates the hushed mysterious backdrop against which...(an) epiphany can occur'.¹⁶ By looking at the body of the seal, which, like Colin, is trapped between life and death, the narrator is witness to a perfect kind of hyper-reality. The seal seems 'alive', 'more real than reality' (259/260). This perfection cannot be captured by the living. As soon as the narrator sees the seal: 'immediately I wanted to take it home' (260). He attempts to capture this moment of perfection and return home with it as a souvenir of the moment of brilliance he witnessed. The object is not able to be possessed though, and despite the narrator's efforts to attach the body to his sleigh, the seal slips off the sleigh, back into the icy water.

¹⁵ Cynthia Sugars, 'Repetition with a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 33.2 (2008), 133-150 (p. 143).

¹⁶ James O. Taylor, 'Art Imagery and Destiny in Alistair MacLeod's Fiction: 'Winter Dog' as Paradigm', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 29.2 (1994), 61-69 (p. 63).

The desire to memorialise and display something which is ephemeral is seen in relation to the endangered, and dying, Cape Breton Scottish culture. Black and white photographs and museum pieces come to symbolise the culture of the area as it retreats into the past. When Calum Rankin thinks of his grandfather's death, over 70 years ago, it seems like 'an improbable sequence of old black-and-white pictures' (150). In 'Clearances', the narrator repeatedly links himself and this traditional understanding of Cape Breton Island culture with symbols of the past. He is 'like a man in a historical documentary...filmed in black and white' (430), and his house feels 'like a museum that he had a hand in creating' (417). These pasts become lacking in colour and realism and thus are symbolic of the culture's increasing irrelevance to the younger generations. The culture is fading into darkness.

Fading Lights In The Dark

Although its culture may be receding into darkness, Cape Breton Island is associated with light and hope for those who think of it as home. The 'island's guiding lights'(NGM 163) are what many of the Islanders use as a source of navigation, and for home-coming Islanders, the sight of the lighthouses 'represent hope to those...who yearned so much to reach its rocky shore' (375). Light imagery is associated with 'warmth and hopeful salvation'(NGM 163), even when linked to incidents in which characters die. When Calum MacDonald passes away in his brother's car just after arriving back in Cape Breton, light imagery is used to depict the death as peaceful and calm. Alexander knows that Calum has died because he is able to see that his brother's body is no longer breathing 'by the glow of the dashboard light' (NGM 261). Rather than describing the darkness which surrounds both men, on a cold winter's night in Cape Breton, MacLeod emphasises how Alexander visually and emotionally comprehends his brother's death; as associated with light and peace. Calum's death is treated as 'a journey homeward and a

reunion, intensely personal'.¹⁷ As Alexander drives onward into Cape Breton, he can see 'in the distance, across the white expanse of ice' the 'now automated light' from the lighthouse, 'a light of warming or perhaps of encouragement' (NGM 261). The light strengthens Alexander's resolve to complete the voyage the brothers set out on, and to drive the final stage of the journey to the family's home. This discussion of lights at the end of Calum's life links his death to that of his parents, who drowned after falling through the frozen ice of the lake they were attempting to cross. When the parents and his brother Colin struck trouble in their crossing, it was light from their lanterns which alerted others to their distress. The parents' lanterns 'seemed to waver and almost dance wildly', forming 'an arc in...the darkness' (NGM 44). This wild dance of light was the last form of movement associated with the parents, whose bodies were not found. The going out of the lanterns marks the passing of the parents' lives, as they themselves pass into the darkness of death.

Whilst Cape Breton is a place of light, the mythical Scotland, which many of MacLeod's characters yearn for, is linked to all consuming darkness. The dying Calum Rankin longs to 'go farther and farther back' into his family's past, through the 'superstitions', 'the fatalistic war cries and the haunting violins' (176) to the genesis of his family's Scottish identity. In 'Clearances', the narrator also looks toward Scotland and longs to go back to this place of the past. Physically, both men stand on a cliff's edge looking out to sea. The characters imagine themselves as being in a past place of fantasy and their sensual perception of the present becomes diminished. The narrator of 'Clearances' seems to lose all awareness of what is going on around him, and as he steps over the cliff he 'hears' a voice in his head, a memory of his friend the Highland shepherd saying 'They will be with you until the end' (431). Calum Rankin stands 'on the cliff's edge and faces out to sea' (178) and is enveloped in darkness. The repeated descriptions of the 'darkness'

¹⁷ Berces, (para. 24 of 26).

places the reader beside Calum in the black confusion. He cannot 'see in the darkness' the 'dark road' nor the 'darkness beneath my feet', and there is only a 'darkened void'(178) beneath him. Calum is no longer aware of anything but this all encompassing darkness, which 'seems to yearn for that other darkness that lies within'(179). Like his 'Clearances' counterpart, Calum perceives nothing physical ('nothing for the hand to touch' (179)) and instead his mind is focused on 'hearing' a memory of 'our song' (149), a Gaelic lament which has been passed down through the family. The 'internal and external darkness reach to become as one' (179) and Calum passes away. The movement from life to death here is 'a continuum along which particular individuals move freely' rather than 'binary opposites'.¹⁸ These two deaths are the only examples in MacLeod's oeuvre in which the reader is privy to the thoughts and the emotions of a character in their final moments. It is perhaps not surprising that those dying characters which MacLeod gives voice to are thinking of Scotland as they pass from one realm to the next. These modern men, Scottish emigrants in mind and spirit if not body, turn away from the light of life and towards the darkness of the mystical place which they have spent their lives longing for: Scotland.

¹⁸ Creelman, ' "Hoping To Strike Some Solidity", p. 91.

Conclusion

Alistair MacLeod's work weaves the physical with the metaphorical. He creates images which, when gently prodded by the reader, fall open to reveal layer after layer of symbolism. A beached whale can be read as an analogy for the emasculation of a character; a symbol of an endangered culture, a comment on the Scottish Diaspora, and yet it is also simply a dead animal on a cold beach. His stories tell with brutal honesty of the physical reality of life on Cape Breton Island. MacLeod's descriptions of the violent deaths and injuries of his characters are at times extremely graphic, yet these descriptions are never gratuitous. His gentle, but firm hold on language means that the blood of his characters is always shed with the clear purpose of better informing the reader of the world of which he writes. MacLeod also explores the kinds of wounds which cannot be seen. His stories consider identity, and the grief his characters feel at having to leave their homeland, or rather homelands: Scotland and Cape Breton Island. Journeys form the skeleton of MacLeod's writing. There is rarely a physical journey made by a character in which a spiritual or emotional voyage is not also undertaken. His writing is of people who are haunted by the competing desires to run, with a 'desperate sense of urgency' (46), away from their island home, yet are always drawn back to a place they love, at all costs.

After leaving Cape Breton, James, of 'The Vastness of the Dark', looks back on his beloved Island and reflects: 'I had somehow thought that "going away" was but a physical thing. And that it had only to do with movement...with the crossing of bodies of water or with boundaries at borders.' (155) But "going away" for MacLeod's characters is not so much about physically driving off in a speeding Cadillac or watching a vanishing shoreline from an emigrant boat. Many of MacLeod's characters have little choice as to whether they physically leave the Island. They leave because they have to. The departing Islanders are only able to choose what emotional and spiritual separation

they will make from their homeland. James comes to realise that when you come from Cape Breton, “going away” refers to journeys of the mind and spirit as much as the body.

The MacDonald siblings, Calum and the twins Alexander and Catriona, illustrate the two choices an exiled Islander can make. Catriona and Alexander choose to view Cape Breton as their spiritual home, but not their emotional nor physical home. They both leave the Island for university education, and make their adult lives away in other parts of the country. To these characters, Cape Breton represents their childhood and their past. Like Catriona at the Calgary airport, such characters occasionally look back towards their homeland, and think of it wistfully as a place they love, before turning around and re-entering the urban, modern lives they have carved out for themselves in Calgary, Vancouver or the United States. In contrast, for Calum, there is no other home but Cape Breton Island. Whilst in the mines of Ontario, the New Brunswick prison, or the Toronto half-way house, his eyes always turn towards Cape Breton. He is always an Islander, who just happens to be somewhere else.

In many ways this thesis is concerned with ‘Calum’s story’. It is his version of the ‘Highland Warrior’ which does not fit with the 20th century world he finds himself in; his blood and scars that link the mining life to the Scottish heroic ancestors; and his friendship with his mare, Christy, which best illustrates the animal-human bond in MacLeod’s fiction. MacLeod’s work mourns the demise of figures like Calum, who embody the traditional way of Cape Breton life. Although Alexander of *No Great Mischief* struggles with guilt at his decision to physically and mentally leave Cape Breton, in departing the Island, he becomes a ‘twentieth-century man’ (NGM 14). Like a car on the highway, Alexander has latched on to the necessary vehicles for success in the late 20th century: education, a ‘professional’ occupation based on mental not physical skill,

and an ability to quietly conform to society's unwritten rules and expectations. Calum, in contrast, is a dying breed. MacLeod is keenly aware that the qualities which would have made someone like Calum a success in heroic and pioneering times - the strength in his hands and his skill on the land - count against him in the world of telephones, 'avocado appliances' (193) and desk jobs. Calum is like the bull of 'In The Fall': powerful and strong when allowed to be in his natural environment, yet crippled and pathetic, shaking and covered with blood and urine, as he is first introduced in the Toronto half-way house, when taken from his 'element of grace' and put into an urban environment which he does not understand.

MacLeod himself is a writer who stands very much on the brink of two worlds: rural Cape Breton and urban, modern Canada. He writes of the Cape Breton of his childhood and young adulthood, with an awareness that the Island life he remembers will be a distant past to the coming generations. MacLeod understands that the grisly and gruelling worlds of the farmers, miners and fishermen need to be recorded in a way which does not glorify nor over-sentimentalise their lives and losses, but instead celebrates them with honesty. To memorialise this dying culture, he has written modern myths. Whilst much of MacLeod's work has links to the Scottish Highland ancestry of the Island, what MacLeod is really doing is using one already established set of heroes - the Highland Warriors and the brave, resilience emigrants - to illustrate to his readers the heroic qualities in the 20th century men and women of Cape Breton. It is as if MacLeod, the bard, is sitting on a bench on Cape Breton Island, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, and explaining to his young children that their uncles, their grandparents and their extended family are equally as brave as the Highland Warrior the young MacLeods have learnt about at school, or as the first emigrants to Cape Breton who are memorialised in the Island's museums. Likewise, when characters long for Scotland, it is as much about

longing for the preservation of their physical homeland, Cape Breton, as it is about a yearning for distant, unseen shores.

Many of MacLeod's stories circle around central ideas and similar characters. The young must leave, but feel torn in doing so, and the elderly feel increasingly irrelevant in their own homeland and turn their gazes to the past. In some ways, MacLeod is retelling the same story over and over again: the story of a culture being drained of its life through out-migration. The story is 'changing with each new retelling as the tellers of the tales change, as they become different, older, more bitter or more serene' ('The Closing Down of Summer' 189). This circularity in his writing is seen in the symbols he draws on throughout his works: the unseen islands and mythical black dogs, which straddle the boundary between the real and the mythical, the Highland Warrior in all his guises, the winding tracks which lead the characters home physically and spiritually, and the mingling of hot blood and frozen ice as characters die and their families are forced to cope with the loss.

It is the link between the physical and the metaphorical which has most fascinated me in my study of MacLeod's work. This thesis is unusual as a piece of MacLeod criticism because it looks at how the literal and the metaphysical layers of MacLeod's stories work together. Most MacLeod criticism focuses on either a literal reading of the works, as tales of 20th rural hardship, or a discussion of the metaphorical layers, but rarely are both elements mutually considered. In analysing the patterns and motifs MacLeod repeatedly draws on, I have established how the image of a car crossing the Canso Causeway is linked to the Scottish Diaspora, or the death of a bi-lingual dog represents the bleeding-out of Cape Breton culture, and how these images work across the stories. Whilst MacLeod's stories are individually stunning, when they are read as a collection the

interconnected patterns and motifs become clear and the full scope of his creative skills are seen.

No Great Mischief and *Island* sit on the shelves of public libraries and in private homes. They are great works of literature, but they have their pages thumbed by school students, by commuters on trains, and by book club members. MacLeod's writing is easily accessible and enjoyable to a wide range of audiences, and the layered quality with which MacLeod writes means that the works challenge, or comfort, each reader differently. I have read and studied MacLeod's stories of emigrant heritage and fractured future from my own small island nation, populated in part by Scottish emigrants. Like Cape Breton, New Zealand is an island rich with natural beauty and culture, but with a high level of out-migration¹ amongst young people, who think fondly of their island 'home' as they go about the new lives they have carved out for themselves in Australia, Asia, Europe and America. In *No Great Mischief*, Alexander says that his wife is supportive of his journeys to see Calum because 'We never know what lies ahead of us' (NGM 255). MacLeod recognises that the future of his beloved culture is uncertain, and his own work becomes a kind of literary wake, full of anecdotes and long conversations into the night, which remembers and celebrates the heroes and the humour of a culture which he fears is dying.

¹ New Zealand has a population of roughly four million people currently living on the island. Statistics New Zealand notes that: 'The number of New Zealanders living overseas is not known precisely, though various estimates have been attempted ranging from 700,000 to more than 1 million.' 'Population faq', *Statistics New Zealand*, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz/sitecore/content/population/Home/population-faq.aspx>> [accessed 2nd June 2011].

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