

A “SUBTERRANEAN RIVER” TO THE PAST

The Importance of Inheritance in Creating Island Identity in the Fiction of Alistair Macleod

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Introduction

Just as Cape Breton writer Alistair MacLeod has a deep-rooted sense of belonging and an unbroken lineage to the Scottish islands that were the homes of his ancestors, MacLeod’s characters carry a strong island identity stemming from that same ancestral home. Their common island identity is represented in a variety of ways, such as the characters’ inherited physical traits or in their fierce loyalty to the clan, whereas the intensity of island living and their shared language, culture, history and islandness give them a sense of cohesion. It is seen in the sometimes overwhelming pull that the island of Cape Breton has on MacLeod’s characters when they are away from it, and the extraordinary measures they resort to in order to get home. It is seen in the significant role played by grandparents, who represent a continuity of inheritance that provides succeeding generations with ancestral memory and a sense of rootedness, which are important contributors to island identity. And it is seen in the sense of isolation felt by generations of islanders who have become ‘used to’ the loneliness of living on an island, as though ‘islandness’ has become part of the family’s genetic disposition.

This paper explores the importance of inheritance—or, as his character Catherine calls it, “some subterranean river that had been running deep within me” (MacLeod, 1999: 163)—in creating island identity in two of MacLeod’s works, the novel *No Great Mischief* (winner of the prestigious international Impac Dublin Literary Award) and the short story ‘Island.’ At the same time, the paper looks at ‘islandness,’ those characteristics of island living that are demonstrated through theme, narrative, physical landscape, imagery and dialect. The bounded nature of their island geography has contributed to the imprinting of MacLeod’s characters’ thoughts and feelings, imaginations and souls. Thus inheritance and islandness underpin how MacLeod’s characters view their island and the world, giving them a distinct island identity.

The Inheritance of Alistair MacLeod

MacLeod’s emotional and physical landscapes are those of Cape Breton Island, on Canada’s east coast. Although MacLeod was born in Saskatchewan, he spent his summers in Cape Breton before moving back at an early age to the island where his parents were raised and where his ancestors settled. As an adult, he returned home every summer from Windsor, Ontario, where he taught English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor, to the environment that influences his work. The Cape Breton landscape is a strong presence in MacLeod’s writing, along with what Douglas Porteous

calls “smellscape” and “soundscape” and ultimately, “homescape”, “that place (where) we are most secure, where we can drop our personas and become ourselves” (Porteous, 1990: 107). In an interview, MacLeod (1984) says:

Living in Nova Scotia has affected my writing to a great, great extent because it is the area in which I grew up. . . in which most of my first impressions were formed. I think this leads to a kind of emotional intensity within the writer, and this, for better or for worse, seems to be my emotional landscape as well as my physical landscape.

Living in the house built by his grandfather, he writes about the “importance of the past . . . of tradition . . . the lives of those who have gone before them” (ibid). In another interview, he says, “I think of myself as coming from a particular place and a particular time. I do not think of myself as anything like an ‘instant’ North American, not sure of his mother’s maiden name” (Nicholson, 1985: 97).

MacLeod’s childhood experiences with extended family in Cape Breton have become a well-spring of material from which he draws, or are “the templates of his creative vision” (Creelman, 2003: 126). Citing his own ancestors who left the Isle of Eigg in the Scottish islands in 1791, MacLeod notes the importance of what Nicholson calls “the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen” by saying that his own ancestors “carried with them the whole body of whatever it is that people carry with them—folklore, emotional weight” (Nicholson, 1985: 92). Generations of knowledge of his ancestors’ Scottish islands and their adopted Cape Breton Island, along with the generational grief, anguish, and guilt that stems from leaving, serve only to deepen MacLeod’s knowledge and roots—a condition that is key to understanding and writing with specificity about his island home.

No Great Mischief

MacLeod’s character Alexander MacDonald, *gille beag ruadh* (trans: the little red-haired boy) in *No Great Mischief*, is fully integrated into an island family and traditions. His membership in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is as obvious as his red hair and it follows him wherever he goes: from his small island off the coast of Cape Breton to his grandparents’ community on Cape Breton Island, to Halifax where he attends university, to the mines of Northern Ontario, to his home outside Toronto, to his twin sister’s home in Calgary. It even follows his brother and sister to Scotland, where their great-great-great-grandfather, *Calum Ruadh*, had immigrated from Moidart in 1779. Belonging is in his blood: it is his Scottish Gaelic inheritance, inculcated from an early age by his grandmother, who tells her family “Always look after your own blood” (MacLeod, 1999: 8). The line is repeated like a mantra by many members of the clan throughout the course of the novel. In fact, Alexander MacDonald is so integrated into the clan that he is one of *three* first cousins of about the same age and with the same red hair named Alexander MacDonald. When Alexander suggests that the traits he and his twin sister share with their grandparents might be genetic, his sister says:

Oh yes, genetic. Sometimes I think of clann Chalum Ruaidh. All of those people with their black and red hair. Like you and me. All of them intertwined and intermarried for two hundred years here in Canada and who knows for how long many years before. In Moidart and Keppoch, in Glencoe and Glenfinnan and Glengarry (ibid: 234–5).

Throughout the course of the novel, we see how Alexander MacDonald comes to accept being part of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. As three-year-olds, he and Catherine are quickly adopted into the community by their paternal grandparents when their parents disappear through the ice. The twins’ older brothers take over the old family farm, finding strength in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Eventually,

poverty and the lure of a livelihood draw the brothers away to the mines in northern Ontario, like so many before them. The grandmother tells Alexander:

Then the men began to go away. At first to work in the woods during the winter. To mainland Nova Scotia, and then to New Brunswick, to the Miramichi, and then to the state of Maine. Some of them never came back. . . 'Blood is thicker than water', we always said (ibid: 268).

As circumstances force the men to leave, the grandmother describes them moving outward into the world as if in a concentric circle, with the island at the centre. Always their blood, their inheritance and their island pull them back.

The characters' individual present is enfolded in the clan's collective past—the Highland Clearances which, at the end of the eighteenth century, forced them away from their home to Nova Scotia. Six generations later the ancestral culture that was transplanted into the New World is withering under the joint pressures of poverty and progress. The secret MacLeod's characters share, but will not admit, is constrained within a double bind, staying in Cape Breton being just as impossible as leaving it. The narrative then obsessively recounts the moment of returning, when the home place provisionally coincides with the characters' longing to dwell there again (Omhovère, 2006: 3).

Alexander and his sister remain behind, cared for by their grandparents. On the day Alexander graduates from university, his cousin, another red-haired Alexander MacDonald, is killed in a mining accident, resulting in Alexander abandoning dentistry and taking his cousin's place with his brothers in the mine, and in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. They listen to Cape Breton fiddle music and sing Gaelic songs, speak "mostly of the past and of the distant landscape which was our home" (MacLeod, 1999: 146) and consort occasionally with the men from Ireland and the men from Newfoundland who share their language and love of stories and their attachment to home. The *clann Chalum Ruaidh* seek the company of like-minded islanders who know the intensity of island living, where the elements are often hostile and life becomes honed to the essentials in order to survive. Their shared language, culture, history and islandness give them a sense of cohesion. Yet the memory of *clann Chalum Ruaidh's* island home haunts and tugs at them, and their homesickness is palpable:

In the lulls between shifts my brothers often spoke of the landscape of their youth and their later young manhood. Far away on the edge of the Canadian Shield they recreated images of seasons and time separate from them by great distances of physical and mental geography. They remembered with great clarity their early lives upon the island: the clouds of gulls rising from the cliffs and the colony of seals at the island's northern end (ibid: 173).

Indeed, one summer while Alexander is still living with his grandparents the brothers "talked all one day and night about the island. In the end we couldn't stand it any longer" (ibid: 210–1). So they drove the 1,700 miles from the mining job in Timmins, Ontario to Cape Breton so they could take a boat out to the island and "drill their initials and their dates and Colin's, too" (ibid: 213), so that their identities would not be forgotten. This intensity of their homesickness is more than just nostalgia. Rather, it compels them to inscribe themselves on the landscape just as the landscape is inscribed on them.

Alexander's life may have continued in this fashion—an intense existence of mining, drinking, and brawling, caused mostly by a longing for Cape Breton and family, and only going home intermittently—but when a third red-haired Alexander MacDonald joins them as part of their crew, the delicate balance is upset. The clan fractures and scatters. The novel becomes a lament for the loss of family and tradition. Nicholson writes, "alongside the informing lyricism, there is also in MacLeod's writing an abiding note of loss and regret, with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of

choric threnody” (Nicholson, 1985: 197). Creelman notes that the importance of the clan system in this novel “cannot be overestimated. . . . (I)ndividuals must anchor themselves in their immediate community in order to attain a sense of identity” (ibid: 140). He adds, “If the identity of the clan is anchored, in part, in the concepts of memory and loyalty, then the clan also identifies itself through moments of opposition and its clear memory of instances of betrayal” (ibid: 142). Despite the betrayals, Alexander’s loyalty to the clan keeps him anchored in a modern world that is losing its sense of family and tradition.

The sister, too, experiences the strength of the family ties. During a trip to Scotland she realizes the distinctiveness of her genes when a woman recognizes the black hair of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* and tells her “But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while” (MacLeod, 1999: 160). Her words “from here” are clear and emphatic as she assumes proprietorship over Catherine, telling her “You are home now” (ibid: 167). Catherine finds herself conversing with the woman in Gaelic, later telling Alexander “It was just like it poured out of me, like some subterranean river that had been running deep within me and suddenly burst forth” (ibid: 163). The ties continue through the next generation as well, when her eleven-year-old son in Calgary is stopped by a beat-up car full of men because they recognize ‘the look’. They give him a fifty-dollar bill and he asks, “ ‘What’s this for?’ . . . ‘It is,’ said the man, ‘for the way you look. Tell your mother it is from *clann Chalum Ruaidh*’ ” (ibid: 30). The “subterranean river” of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is a leash to the past, holding fast its descendants and securing their island identity while offering them a guide line into the future.

In order to solidify her ties, Catherine longs to have a photograph of her parents, and laments the fact that she has only group photos of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*.

I thought, with modern technology . . . I could separate our parents from these large groups ... The photo studio tried, but it would not work. As the photographs became larger the individual features of their faces became more blurred. It was as if in coming closer they became more indistinct. After a while I stopped. I left them with their group. It seemed the only thing to do (ibid: 240–1).

As Williams notes, “Here is graphic evidence of the claim that the individual has no distinct identity apart from the clan” (Williams, 2001: 50). Catherine’s attempt to disentangle her parents from the rest of the relatives in the photograph is a powerful metaphor of the strength of the clan’s interconnectedness: the harder she tries, the more blurred they become. In the photo her parents have lost their individuality, but as part of the group they possess a strength that even the power of modern technology cannot break. In the end Catherine gave up trying and “left them with their group”, symbolizing her acceptance of her inheritance.

The interconnectedness of clan is also symbolized in the Celtic ring, the never-ending circle described as “a braid or knot that binds life and death, past and future” (Jirgens, 2001:88). The third Alexander wears it and tells Alexander, “ ‘My grandfather gave me this ring.’ ‘I noticed it,’ I said, ‘the first day that you came’ ” (MacLeod, 1999: 243). Given Alexander’s attachment to the clan, he could not help but notice such an obvious symbol of interconnectedness as the Celtic knot.

The novel’s references to the importance of history and inheritance for Alexander and his family signify the need for this island family to stay strongly together in the face of the encroaching sameness that threatens to overwhelm their distinctive culture and identity. Early in the novel, Alexander observes “[a] young woman wearing a black T-shirt walk(ing) towards me. The slogan on the front reads, ‘Living in the past is not living up to our potential’ ” (ibid: 60). While this statement appears to eschew the past and embrace modernity, we realize that it is meant as a lovely, ironic touch. MacLeod is addressing the nostalgia trap head-on by saying that it is only through accepting

the strong familial bonds of history that Alexander can find his potential, reaffirming his identity as an integral part of 'the past'. Alexander realizes "All of us are better when we're loved" (ibid: 272, 283)—including himself.

'Island'

MacLeod's 'Island,' published in a collection also called *Island*, is a short story set within the confines of a tiny island off Cape Breton Island which has a population that has dwindled down to one. The main character, Agnes MacPhedran, is confined and bound by her island and in that boundedness she comes to be strongly identified with it as "the madwoman of the island." Indeed MacLeod's recurrent theme of islanders' identities being closely connected to their islands is most literal in 'Island,' as the name of Agnes's island demonstrates:

Gradually, with the passage of the years, the family's name as well as their identity became entwined with that of the island. So that although the island had an official name on the marine and nautical charts it became known generally as MacPhedran's Island while they themselves became known less as MacPhedrants than as people 'of the island'. Being identified as 'John the Island', 'James the Island', 'Mary of the Island', 'Theresa of the Island'. As if in giving their name to the island they had received its own lonely designation in return (MacLeod, 2000: 376).

As the MacPhedrants lose their last name to the island, it is replaced with "the Island". It is interesting to note the distinction between the designations of men versus women: John is not known as *of* the island as is Mary; rather he *is* the island. This is, no doubt, because Mary or Theresa are there to play a supporting role to their husbands, who *have become* the island.

The island becomes a symbol of isolation, as generations of MacPhedrants tend the light over many years:

In answer to the question of isolation, they told themselves they would get used to it. They told themselves they were already used to it, coming as they did from a people in the far north of Scotland who had for generations been used to the sea and the wind and sleet and rocky outcrops at the edge of their part of Europe. Used to the long nights when no one spoke and to the isolation of islands (ibid: 375).

The MacPhedrants' Scottish island ancestry mentioned here is significant—just as it is in several other MacLeod stories where characters are part of an important island lineage. Agnes is an integral part of the island's history, as the omniscient narrator notes: "For by the time she was born the intertwined history of the family and the island was already far advanced" (ibid: 377). Since so many of her ancestors have lived on islands, carrying the weight of their islands' isolation and getting "used to" the loneliness, it is as though 'islandness' has become part of the family's DNA. A similar idea has been suggested by David Williams in reference to MacLeod's dogs in the oft-repeated line in *No Great Mischief*: "It was *in* those dogs to care too much and to try too hard" (MacLeod, 1999: 57). He writes:

As it happens, saying and doing carry a common pedigree, as if there could be a bloodline and a voiceline reaching back to Moidart in the Scottish Highlands, almost as if words, like organic cells, could replicate their own DNA (Williams, 2001: 55).

Indeed, the island is so much a part of Agnes' history that her life becomes subsumed by it. She feels she has no choice but to remain on the island because she is "used to" the work. She does so without

complaint, as the MacPhedrains are always “used to” whatever life throws their way. But for all her stoicism, she is also self-aware as she knows “they were often regarded as slightly eccentric because of how and where they lived. Always anticipating questions about the island’s loneliness” (MacLeod, 2000: 381). But, as her lover tells her in the one short summer they spend together before he is killed in the lumberwoods, “Some people are lonely no matter where they are” (ibid: 381).

As years pass, the island becomes a place of myth, around which mainland boat operators offer trips to view “the mad woman of the island” (ibid: 406). As for Agnes, “Standing at the edge of the sea in her dishevelled men’s clothing and surrounded by her snarling dogs, she later realized, she had passed into folklore” (ibid: 406). From playing a very real and useful role as lighthouse-keeper to becoming a part of folklore, Agnes and the island become a symbol of a passing way of life. The story is a critique of how a life of integration between landscape and the self is destroyed, and with it comes the loss of innocence. With her death, the direct line to the past is finally broken.

Conclusions

In much of MacLeod’s work, then, the source of his characters’ island identity is drawn from the theme of belonging and exile, which carries with it a host of historical and societal factors that interact with one another. The importance of clan to twentieth-century Cape Bretoners is paramount, arising from the clan experience on the Scottish islands, where islanders were forced to work together in order to survive. Clan history resonates with current experience of societal and economic factors on an impoverished island where outside forces—such as a cash economy that has replaced a subsistence one—force many of these same Cape Bretoners into exile in order to support their families.

MacLeod’s strength as a writer comes from grounding his work in the particularity of everyday Cape Breton Island experience, as well as drawing upon his ancestral lineage and his deep-rooted sense of belonging. Jane Urquhart writes about how MacLeod’s stories are:

...in their portrayal of an ancestral past that continually affects the present and in their sense of deep yearning for forsaken landscapes, as fresh and complex as the present moment. We Canadians are, after all, a nation composed of people longing for a variety of abandoned homelands and tribes that inhabited them (Urquhart, 2001: 37).

Because so many of us share the immigrant experience, either personally or through the stories of our ancestors, MacLeod’s work resonates strongly with readers. As one reviewer writes, “I felt that I had been breathing the cold clear air of Cape Breton and been granted an insight into a part of human history” (Impac). Because the stories are so grounded in the local and the particular, and are written with such authenticity and passion, readers’ reactions tend to be visceral, eliciting emotions that connect to their own hearts and psyches and personal histories of ancestral immigration, making MacLeod’s stories their stories, too. Because of that, MacLeod’s writing is universal: readers in dozens of languages around the world identify with MacLeod’s portrayal of islandness. Thus, to paraphrase John Donne, “No island is an island.”

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