

Past, Present, and Memory

The Ambivalence of Tradition in the Short Stories of Alistair MacLeod

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Article abstract

The short stories of Alistair MacLeod are strongly influenced by the traditional folk culture of the descendants of the Scots originally displaced by the highland clearances, especially those who settled in Cape Breton. In his treatment of that culture, however, MacLeod develops an ambivalent tension between past and present that results in his characters being caught between the two, tied to the former by memory while struggling to adjust to the demands and harsh realities of the latter.

PAST, PRESENT, AND MEMORY

The Ambivalence of Tradition in the Short Stories of Alistair MacLeod

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The editor of a small collection of essays published in 2001 stated in her introduction that “the essays in this book explore the hold on the heart that is Alistair MacLeod’s writing” (Guilford 2001: 9). The honours and awards, both national and international, that have been bestowed on MacLeod’s work suggest that his writing has indeed touched many a heart, and that fact alone seems to have introduced a note of uncertainty or disquietude among some critics. One gets a sense that, despite the recognition MacLeod has received in recent years, his writing is seen by some as not quite in step with the times, and, because he has not produced a prodigious quantity of work, he can’t be considered in the same league as today’s literary superstars. John Ditsky took a swipe at this attitude as early as 1988 when he wrote:

Perhaps it is ironic that MacLeod’s fiction is to be first published in book form in the U. S. by the Ontario Review Press run by Joyce Carol Oates and her husband Ray Smith, when one considers the disparity between the prolific Oates — often absurdly disparaged for just that trait — and the comparatively plodding MacLeod, Oates’s onetime University of Windsor colleague. Likely, she simply appreciates the distinctive qualities of MacLeod’s stories (2).

Similarly, Jane Urquhart, in her own very positive commentary on the stories in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories*, noted that MacLeod’s stories “have been called ... traditional, even conservative, by a literary world cluttered with theories and *isms*” (2001: 37). The publication of his novel, *No Great Mischief*, in 1999, precipitated renewed

interest in MacLeod's work, but the disquietude remained. One reviewer of the novel noted:

No one ever says anything about MacLeod's work that could be construed as even mildly negative. Quite the opposite. Despite the slightness of his output (one novel, sixteen stories) and despite the reluctance of academic critics to examine it closely, he has been allotted a secure niche in the Canadian pantheon (Mathews 2004: 120).

Claire Omhovère perhaps comes closest to answering these concerns when she writes of MacLeod:

His stories are indeed equally concerned with the centripetal forces of the ethnic culture in which they are embedded and with the centrifugal expansion of writing that announces its scope and concerns as universal, as if immune — or perhaps indifferent — to five decades of post-humanist critique and deconstructive doubt (2006: 50).

I will focus here on the sixteen stories in *Island* and refer briefly to *No Great Mischief* for comparison purposes only. The impetus for this paper derives from the fact that I have been using *Island*¹ in both my undergraduate and graduate Folklore and Literature classes and wish to approach the stories therein from a folklorist's perspective. I will not, of course, ignore the literary considerations, but I want to privilege and focus on some of the "distinctive qualities" and especially the "traditional" aspects that Ditsky and Urquhart mention. In doing so I intend to show that MacLeod's stories must be taken on their own very specific terms, as suggested by Omhovère and others, and that only when they are can their true qualities be appreciated. The stories are grounded in place and time, they are culture specific, and they are mostly told from a masculine, first-person perspective. His "characters and contexts are miners and their families, fishermen or farmers and their communities. His are, in the proper sense of the word, elemental fictions" (Nicholson 1985: 90).

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1. Most of MacLeod's stories were first published in periodicals and magazines, beginning with "The Boat," which appeared in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1968. They were later published in two collections: *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (1986). The stories in these collections were brought together and, with the addition of "Island" and "Clearances," were published as *Island: The Collected Stories of Alistair MacLeod* in a cloth edition (2000) and in the paperback Emblem Editions (2001). All page references to the stories in this paper are to the 2001 edition.

For most of his writing life MacLeod's genre of choice has been the short story. It is interesting to speculate whether, having produced one outstanding novel, he will continue to write in that form or return to the short story again. One expects that he will. He once explained his liking for the short story form this way:

I like the compression of it, the intensity of it and that you can deal with one or two ideas. I like to write with a kind of intensity. In track and field terms, I think of it as a 100 yard-dash, whereas I think of a novel as a marathon! When I began to write the novel, I was not sure whether I could maintain that intensity for 300 pages. That's why I like the short stories (Collinge and Sohler 2003: 257).

He makes a similar comment when asked about his "narrative predilection almost exclusively dedicated to the present tense."

In that mode you can be tremendously intense. I just like that. I think that individuals are very interested in telling their own stories, and to adapt this persona is very effective in just riveting [sic] the listener. I do think of Coleridge's ancient mariner who, having been ordered by the wedding guest to release him — "eftsoons his hand dropt he" — fixes him with his glittering eye and just tells his story. I think, too, of David Copperfield's opening, "I am Born," and think how basic, and arresting that is (Nicholson 1986: 92).

Note his emphasis here on compression, intensity, and speech-like forms. His concern is with the teller and the listener more so than with the writer and the reader. In this, of course, he is very much in line with contemporary thinking regarding the short story, and the belief that "short stories have remained close to the original source of narrative in myth, folktale, fable, and fairy tale" (May 1994: xxvi).

The approach that MacLeod takes in the stories is traditional (Ben-Amos 1984) in both form and content. It is easily demonstrated that he writes like a teller, and there are strong overtones of orality embedded in his writing. Even a quick glance through *Island* reveals that many of his titles are suggestive of yarns and tales that are about to be *told*. Consider, for example, the following: "The Vastness of the Dark"; "The Golden Gift of Grey"; "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," "The Closing Down of Summer"; and, "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun." Similarly, many of his first lines recall the typical formulaic openings we associate with traditional oral narratives: "It is an evening during the summer that I am ten years old and I am on a train with my parents as it rushes toward the end of eastern Nova Scotia" (79); "I am speaking now of a July in

the early 1970s and it is in the morning just after the sun has risen following a night of heavy rains" (143); "I am speaking here of a time when I was eleven and lived with my family on our small farm on the west coast of Cape Breton" (209); "It was the summer after the seventh grade that saw me truly smitten with the calf club wish" (218); "Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea" (310); and "I don't remember when I first heard the story but I remember the first time that I heard and remembered it" (321). Keefer maintains that "often [MacLeod] seems to sing rather than tell his stories" (182), and Baer reminds him that "you once said that 'I like to think that I am telling a story rather than writing it'" (336-37). I will not quibble with the distinction, but what is important is that, as with the traditional spinner of yarns or singer of tales, we are aware that we are being *told* the stories. MacLeod's stories do not evolve through immediate action or dialogue. Action, usually action that has occurred in the past, is described by the narrator and one of the first things that strikes the reader is how little dialogue there is in any of MacLeod's stories.

A search through the stories for folklore items is a worthwhile and productive exercise, as the students in my classes quickly demonstrate. One can isolate numerous examples of occupational lore, family folklore, folk speech, folksong, and other folklore forms scattered through the collection. Here, however, I wish to focus more generally on the tension between the traditional culture of the past and life in the present that runs like a repeated refrain through all the stories. Several commentators have noted this tension. Omhovère maintains that "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" (2006: 51-52). Cape Breton in MacLeod's stories connotes the past, but is a conceptualization of the past that is to be understood not only in relation to a former time but also in relation to world view, occupation, and the Gaelic language and culture. The present and the contemporary tend to be seen and portrayed as antithetical to this conceptualization.

"A sense of loss and melancholy is the hallmark of MacLeod's prose" (Zagratzki 2000: 207). One is reminded of similar sentiments expressed in traditional songs and lyrics, and, for that matter, in contemporary ones that we associate with the folk revival as well. Consider, as a ready example, the last verse of the contemporary song "Come by the Hills": "Oh, come by the hills to the land where legend remains. / The stories of old fill the heart and may yet come again. / Where the past has been

lost, and the future is still to be won; / And the cares of tomorrow must wait till this day is done" (Smith). For MacLeod's characters, however, while the past may well have been lost, it is forever enshrined in and revived by memory. As one commentator puts it, "MacLeod's readers are repeatedly invited to scrutinize the reasons why his heroes are held in captivity by narratives of the past" (Hiscock 2000: 55). There is much more to this, however, than a longing for the good old days or the expression of a folksy romanticization of the past. Instead "MacLeod's stories present an elegiac treatment of a passing way of life, not simply an economic one, but also a philosophical or spiritual one" (Kruk 1999: 144), and in so doing they also suggest a way of "seeing the archaic in the contemporary" (Lepaludier 2003: 54).

The narrator's grandfather in "The Vastness of the Dark" says of the coal mining life: "Once you start, it takes a hold of you, once you drink underground water, you will always come back to drink some more. The water gets in your blood. We have been working the mines here since 1873" (35). Similarly, the narrator's grandmother in "The Return," even while cataloguing the trials of the past, extols it.

But it seems that we can only stay forever if we stay right here. As we have stayed to the seventh generation. Because in the end that is all there is — just staying. I have lost three children at birth but I've raised eight sons. I have one a lawyer and one a doctor who committed suicide, one who died in coal beneath the sea and one who is a drunkard and four who still work the coal like their father and those four are all that I have that stand by me. It is these four that carry their father now that he needs it, and it is these four that carry the drunkard, that dug two days for Andrew's body and that have given me thirty grandchildren in my old age (87-88).

But the past articulated in this way is also a trap. The MacKinnon crew in "The Closing Down of Summer" are trapped by and in their very expertise. They can afford to while away the lazy late summer days since the big companies "will wait for us because they know from years of many contracts that we are the best bet to deliver for them in the end" (202). Their competitors, the Lafrenière and Picard crews, who do the same traditional mining work, "are imprisoned in the depths of their language. And because they speak no English they will not move out of Quebec or out of northern or northeastern Ontario" (203). While most of the Gaelic-speaking characters also speak English, the environmental forces and economic conditions that prescribe their lives create "a Sisyphean context in which the human spirit is seen striving to affirm its most basic values rather than submitting to the weight of necessity" (Berces 1991: 115-16).

If the past is a trap, the present is a wasteland. It is most often negatively characterized as vulgar, crude, and mercenary, as exemplified by characters such as the salesman in "The Vastness of the Dark," MacRae in "In the Fall," and Sal in "The Tuning of Perfection." The salesman describes Springhill as "a hell of a place.... unless you want to get laid." And goes on to explain that there have been "lots of mine accidents here and the men killed off. Women used to getting it all the time. Mining towns are always like this.... They don't give a damn" (51). MacRae has "an odour that comes of his jostling and shoving the countless frightened animals that have been carried on the back of his truck, an odour of manure and sweat and fear" (105). He has come to take the family's faithful but old and unproductive horse "for mink-feed" (106). He already has a huge but aged Ayrshire bull tied in the back of his truck. As he and the young narrator pass the truck on the way to the barn, he muses for the narrator's benefit:

"How'd you like to have a pecker on you like that fella?" shouts MacRae into the wind. "Bet he's had his share and driven it into them little heifers a good many times. Boy, you get hung like that, and you'll have all them horny little girls squealin' for you to take 'em behind the bushes. No time like it with them little girls, just when the juice starts runnin' in 'em and they're findin' out what it's for" (108).

Sal is the granddaughter of Archibald, a patriarchal traditional singer who is torn between disappointing his family members who are eager to sing on television and being unfaithful to the tradition by truncating the ancient ballads to accommodate the demands of the medium. Sal has no such misgivings. In answer to Archibald's question regarding which songs the television people want them to sing, she says:

"Oh who cares? It's the trip [to Halifax] that's important. Some of the old songs" (284).

Similarly, when he asks her if she understands the Gaelic words, she says that she does not, and continues: "Neither will anybody else. I just make the noises. I've been hearing the things since I was two. I know how they go. I'm not dumb, you know" (285). To ensure that we link her with the attitudes expressed by the salesman and MacRae, we are told that "she wore a tight-fitting T-shirt with the words 'I'm Busted' across her chest" (283), and on her car "a muddied bumper sticker read: 'If you're horny, honk your horn'" (286).

The present is not simply crude, however. It represents the spurious, the disposable, and the transitory as opposed to the past and the traditional way of life which stand for that which is seen as genuine, valuable, and lasting. This point is made over and over again in the stories. The narrator's mother in "The Boat" vents her disdain for the local Sea Food Restaurant and those who patronize it — mostly tourists.

"Who are these people anyway?" she would ask, tossing back her dark hair, "and what do they, though they go about with their cameras for a hundred years, know about the way it is here, and what do they care about me and mine, and why should I care about them?" (10).

The parents of the young, academically bright, budding pool-shark narrator in "The Golden Gift of Grey"² express similar misgivings.

For they were both of them barely literate and found even the signing of the magnificent report cards that their children triumphantly and relentlessly presented to them something of a task. Yet while they were sometimes angry and tried to be contemptuous of 'book learnen' and people who were just 'book smart' they encouraged both as much as they could, seeing in them a light that had never visited their darkness, but realizing that even as they fanned the flames they were losing a grip on almost all they had of life. And feeling themselves as if washed by a flood down the side of a shale-covered Kentucky mountain, clutching and grasping at twigs and roots with their hopeful fingers bloodied raw (64).

Examples could be multiplied because almost every story in the collection deals with the same tension between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern. It is perhaps most poignantly expressed by the departing father in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," who catalogues what he might offer his son were he to remove him from his grandparents' care and his current life in an isolated Newfoundland outpost:

And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my *summa cum laude* loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze where you may sleep till ten of nine. And I will show you the elevator to the apartment on the sixteenth floor and introduce you to the buzzer system and the yards of

2. This is the only story in the collection that is not Maritimes-centred either temporally or narratively. It focuses on a Kentucky coal-mining family who have moved north, where the father works in a meat-packing plant. Thematically, however, it shares the same focus as the others.

wrought-iron fences where the Doberman pinscher runs silently by night (139).

This is hardly an enviable patrimony.

It may sound like a harsh criticism to say that all of MacLeod's stories, and indeed his novel as well, deal with the same places, the same people, and the same issues.³ A similar assessment might be made of the Homeric epics, and the comparison is not a frivolous one for MacLeod's work to date amounts to an epic commentary on the lives of the displaced Scots of the Celtic Diaspora in Cape Breton specifically and in Canada generally. The key term here is not diaspora — although Homer's heroes do spend a great deal of time displaced, wandering, and searching — but epic. As one commentator has stated it: "His books are elemental and ancient. They go back to the world of Odysseus, to Homer's Ithaca" (Miller 2002: 152). For the most part the epic is a remembered one. MacLeod often embeds a remembered story within the story being told, so that the lost past is continually recalled in an attempt to revivify it. As Davidson points out, "there is more to what we might well term MacLeod's poetics of loss than just the inevitable passing of people and the language that some of them once spoke. Displacement, substitution, and elision do give these stories a characteristic elegiac tone," which results in "a present awareness of a past heritage of loss, a continuity, so to speak, of dispossession" (41). The narrator's dead grandfather, in "The Road to Rankin's Point," prophetically recorded the legacy of dispossession by writing, "in the blackest of ink," on the rafters of his barn: "We are the children of our own despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree" (159).

Displacement is the keyword here. Because of the pull and the power of tradition those who cling to it continually experience displacement, and therein lies the ambivalent quality of tradition in MacLeod's work. Creelman argues that "MacLeod is representing a social structure that is anchored firmly by patriarchal traditions and assumptions" (134), and goes on to conclude:

MacLeod's defence of the traditional community is so clear and powerful that he is placed in a rather difficult position. Having

3. It is worth noting, however, that, as of 2005, his stories had been translated into more than fifteen languages (Baer 2005: 347).

rejected the modern world and placed his hope in the traditional and conservative vision of society reproduced within the clan system, he must, in the narrative structure itself, acknowledge that the old social structure has not only diminished but is in the process of disappearing (142).

That, of course, is exactly the point. All the major characters in MacLeod's writings fall into one of two camps: those who cling to the old ways — Archibald in "The Tuning of Perfection," the McKinnon crew "perhaps the best crew of shaft and development miners in the world" (181) in "The Closing Down of Summer," the grandmother in "The Road to Rankin's Point" — who know they are of a dying breed, but stubbornly refuse to adjust or capitulate; and, those who appear to have escaped the "old ways," as it were — the narrator in "The Boat" who "teaches at a great Midwestern university" (2), the *summa cum laude* narrator of "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," the father in "The Return" who is a partner in his father-in-law's Montreal law firm, Alexander, the orthodontist narrator of *No Great Mischief* — who carry an almost crippling burden of guilt for having done so.

MacLeod's is not a pretty vision. The traditional work environments are "not demonized, but the natural world is unrelenting, dangerous, and devouring" (Creelman 2003: 130). His male characters carry the wounds and scars of their traditional professions. Of the McKinnon crew the narrator says: "many of us carry one shoulder permanently lower than the other... few of us have all our fingers and some have lost either eyes or ears" (183). MacLeod's female characters have been mistakenly viewed as "stereotyped shrews and Madonnas/mothers" (135). This is especially true of the mother in "The Boat," who "ran her house as her brothers ran their boats" (5). Those who subscribe to this view fail to realize that such women, who are "almost dehumanized by loyalty to a place which seems reduced to primal elements — wind, water, rock" (Keefer 1987: 182), must also be the touchstone for those who depend upon them so heavily for support in all matters except the earning of the often meagre wages which is the precarious domain of the men.

MacLeod describes himself as a realist writer: "What I think of, in terms of realist writing, is: telling the truth as I happen to see it. I think Raymond Carver calls it 'bringing the news.' I don't see myself doing

'romantic' writing. I'm satisfied with realistic writing" (Kruk 1995: 158). Most commentators agree, and some see him as an existential realist.

MacLeod's existential fictive world is inherently one of historical and aesthetic faith, and his realism is more nearly akin to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*... termed an "ideal realism" (Berces 1991: 127).⁴

This has not prevented him, however, when the divide between desire and fulfilment, between hope and despair, between past and present becomes a gaping chasm, from having recourse to what Creelman calls "mysticism" (136), but what I prefer to call folk belief, to reach, if not the happy-ever-after resolution of fairy tales, an acceptable compromise which refuses to break faith with what, in essence, it means to be human.

In "The Tuning of Perfection," when Archibald is enmeshed in the dilemma — whether to break with tradition and shorten the old songs to please the television producers or stand his ground and not make the trip to Halifax — he has a dream in which his dead wife sings to him "with a clarity and beauty that caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck even as the tears welled to his eyes" (304). When he awakes he is totally refreshed and his mind is made up. He will not shorten his songs or speed them up to placate the television producers or his relatives. There are otherworldly visitations woven throughout the multi-layered "Vision" which usually help to warn the living of impending danger. The ending of "Island" suggests that the long dead lover returns in revenant form to keep the promise made years before in the summer before his death in the winter lumber woods. In "The Road to Rankin's Point" the morning following the death of the narrator's grandfather is described so:

In the morning [the narrator's grandmother] sent her oldest son, who was ten at the time, to walk along the frozen cliffs; and when he returned, white and breathless, the news he brought was already expected. Shortly after he left, she had often said, she began to hear the death ring or the sound of the death bell in her right ear. It came from off the frozen Gulf of St. Lawrence, borne on the stillness, and

4. Coleridge uses this term in a discussion of the "philosophic imagination" as it relates to a unified vision of mind and matter, the abstract and the concrete, the ideal and the real. See Engell and Bate 1983: xciv-xcv, 241-42, 260-62.

no, it was not to be confused with the crying of the white and drifting seals. And then, almost in response to the bell, she had heard the howls of the three black-and-white border collies⁵ that had accompanied her son (149).

These and other incidents would seem to suggest that, even in the elemental world of Maritimers, life is not always as it seems on the surface. Keeping that in mind, it is perhaps apt to end with a comment from the grandmother in *The Road to Rankins Point*, spoken seventy years after her husband's death, a comment that might well stand as an overarching thematic statement of MacLeod's work so far: "No one has ever said that life is to be easy. Only that it has to be lived" (172).

5. For an insightful study of the roles that dogs play in MacLeod's work see Anderson 2004.

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