

Of Blood and Bone: Myth and Memory in the Imagining of Scottish-Canadian Identity

The Highland Clearances of the 1700s left an indelible mark on not only the social and communal histories of Scotland, but of Eastern Canada as well. The Highlanders who were forced from their land by English land-owners and sometimes their own chieftains brought with them to the new world vivid memories of home and clan. These cultural memories are of central concern in Alistair MacLeod's fiction, and continue to be more than nostalgic reminiscences of a lost homeland. Rather, they have been an essential element of living memory for more than two hundred years, and have been embedded in perceptions of the unfolding present to become a determining factor in the way in which modern Scottish-Canadian identity has continued to evolve. For Macleod himself, the authenticity of Canada as refuge for a dispossessed Highland culture is tested on and resonates with the pulse of his own family genealogy. For MacLeod's narrators, who are caught between a vanished past and a disappearing future, storytelling serves as a bridge between memory and the constitution of modern selfhood. Canada, once a literal refuge for dispossessed Highland Scots, has become a refuge for culture and history in which Gaelic memory functions as a basis for cognition and as an essential element in the construction of modern identities.

I'd like to begin this paper by acknowledging the connections between MacLeod's novel, *No Great Mischief* and his short stories, focusing on "The Closing Down of Summer" and "The Road to Rankin's Point" in particular. *No Great Mischief's* themes of history, identity, and loss resonate with MacLeod's earlier fiction, particularly when the reader is attuned to the organizing role of memory in a narrative in which much is left unsaid. Through the eyes of Alexander MacDonald, *No Great Mischief* traces the evolution of the MacDonald family history over a span of two centuries. The tale begins with the first Calum MacDonald's immigration to Cape Breton Island in 1779 and follows his story's continuing affect on the twentieth century family members. As in the short stories, the narrative of *No*

Great Mischief is densely packed with references to the traditions and language of the Scottish Highlanders. Through the interweaving of Alexander's reminiscences of the history of the Highland clans with the defining moments of Alexander's own personal experience, MacLeod remythologizes ancient Gaelic concerns.

This remythologizing reverberates between the novel and the short stories through Alexander's description of the contemporary *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, embodied in the gang of miners (including the narrator's three elder brothers) who "follow the shafts" out of both economic necessity and loyalty to the past. Despite the seemingly anachronistic and archaic nature of the clan system, the notion of the *clann* provides an essential foundation of identity for the miners. As we find in "The Closing Down of Summer," these clansmen are contemporary "warriors," linked to Highland ancestors through myth and genealogy. These links are forged and preserved in the memory of their own seanaichie—embodied by Alexander, the "book one" (*Mischief* 173)—who is, in turn, shaped by the story he tells. In Gaelic tradition, the seanaichie's chief occupation was "the study and transmission of traditional history, genealogy, and legend" (*OED*). Historically, both warrior and seanaichie played very different but complementary roles in the survival of the clans: on the one hand, the warrior ensured the physical, day to day survival of his people against hostile clans and armies, whereas the seanaichie ensured that both the warrior and the clan he protected survived the battle against time. By fulfilling his role as seanaichie, Alexander is likewise able to fulfil the fundamental duty prescribed by his grandparents which links them back to those mythical Highland ancestors: "always look after your own blood" (*Mischief* 12). Through Alexander's sense of what it means to "look after your blood" in both a personal and a historical context, MacLeod dramatises the shared provenance between memory, myth, and story.

This shared provenance is addressed repeatedly in Alexander's characterisations of his

family members, particularly of his oldest brother Calum. When first introducing his brother, Alexander takes us through Toronto streets and into the cheap housing that shelters a transient population. Calum's advanced alcoholism culminates in a depiction of him "spitting blood or swaying in the shadows as he attempts to urinate in the sink" (*Mischief* 11); this image, combined with Alexander's hasty retreat from the apartment to buy his volatile brother more drink, seems in keeping with an image of Calum as a wreck of a man with a "long history of violent transgressions" (242). However, during what David Williams refers to as "the longest trip in literature to the beer store" (98), Alexander constructs another image of his brother. As he recollects their shared history, the narrator envisions Calum as a warrior and a leader. Actions that resulted in violence are invested with meaning and extenuating circumstance; finer sensibilities and loyalties are inscribed on his character. Calum becomes a man haunted not only by the loss of parents and a younger brother but by his imagined responsibility for their deaths, for he was not there to save them when they perished. In "The Closing Down of Summer," MacLeod explores "the problem of the intelligent, reflective, inarticulate person" (Nicholson "Alistair" 198), a problem which provides insight into Alexander's representation of Calum's character. In his monologue, MacKinnon (who is the narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer" and also a miner) expresses an unfulfilled desire for communication: "I would like somehow to show and tell the nature of my work and perhaps some of my entombed feelings to those that I would love, if they would care to listen" (*Island* 197).

The reader of *No Great Mischief* can infer similar sentiments from Alexander's interpretations of his brother's actions and from Calum's own terse observations, which often echo their grandparents' inherited clichés. A man to whom action comes more naturally than words, Calum internalizes and lives the maxims of the *clann*. Connected by verbal echoes and imagery to legendary clan chief Mac Ian in *No Great Mischief*, Calum is the miners' undisputed leader. He is the one with whom the manager negotiates; he is the one chosen for

the difficult jobs. He is also the one who assumes responsibility—and is assumed responsible—for the members of his gang and his family. Like Mac Ian, another “troublesome man” who was made to “serve as an example for those who chose to break the law” (*Mischief* 242), Calum is translated in his brother’s narrative into the sort of leader around whom legends grow. Thus, Alexander fulfils the duty of looking after his blood by translating the past—both personal and communal—into an essential element of living twentieth century memory.

From the outset, the tension between traditional and modern culture is represented by the tension between the two brothers. Alexander, a successful orthodontist, reluctantly describes himself as “a twentieth- century man. . . . ‘*whether I like it or not*’” (*Mischief* 14). By becoming an orthodontist, Alexander has broken with the clan tradition that has led his surviving brothers to work in the mines. There is in this break a sense of progress (as his Grandpa tells him, “This means you will never have to work again” (101)), but there is also the lurking sense of an unacknowledged betrayal which reverberates in Calum’s cryptic comment, “We have come a long way, you and I, and there are no hard feelings” (9). This not-quite betrayal haunts Alexander in ways that he himself seems unable to explain—all he can do is attempt to atone for it through his awkward weekly visits to Calum and through their final drive back to Cape Breton in fulfilment of Calum’s dying request. Again, it is MacKinnon in “The Closing Down of Summer” who is able to articulate the situation:

Our sons will go to the universities to study dentistry or law and to become fatly affluent before they are thirty. . . . They will join expensive clubs. . . . and they will not die in falling stone or chilling water or thousands of miles from those they love. They will not die in any such manner, partially at least because we have told them not to. . . [And] because it seems they will follow our advice instead of our lives, we will experience, in any future that is ours, only an increased sense of anguished

isolation and an ironic feeling of confused bereavement. (*Island* 199)

The sense of isolation and bereavement that MacKinnon describes is felt not only by Calum, who has lived the family tradition, but by Alexander as well. Through Alexander's uneasy awareness that he is part of a movement away from tradition, MacLeod signals to his readers what is at stake for the Gaelic community. Consequently, the orthodontist adopts the role of the traditional storyteller in an attempt to preserve that which is in danger of being lost.

One of the most significant times (according to Alexander) in the brothers' shared history is the summer when Alexander passed up a scholarship to work in the mine with his brothers after one of their gang is killed. He envisions them as warriors, battling stone and clay, as well as human enemies. This brief period of time expands to fill much of Alexander's narrative: it is present not only in his description of that time but in his present perceptions of the work he does as an orthodontist. He observes, "When I first started practising dentistry, I sometimes saw myself in my white coat with my dentist's drill as an extension of my earlier self, with the jackleg drill. Leaning toward the surface that I drilled while the cooling water splashed back towards my face. Drilling deep but not too deep. Trying to get it right" (*Mischief* 253). During his time in the mine, Alexander describes how "time seemed to compress and expand almost simultaneously" (185). This description of the effect of working underground becomes a fitting analogy for the workings of memory in the reminiscences of the storyteller as he constructs of this evolving narrative of self and clan.

Recent sociological theories suggest that memory is active not only in our interpretation of past experiences but also in our perception of present experience, as MacLeod's storytellers—often painfully—reveal. Because memory "functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellection, in every act of language," it becomes "the essential condition of our cognition" (Terdiman 9). Boundaries between past and present are blurred: "not simply because present factors tend to influence—some might want to say distort—our

recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present” (Connerton 2). Through memory, we become conscious of temporal existence, both as individuals and as members of a community.

This relationship between self and social context brings to light a complex interplay between personal and communal memory—each of which exerts significant influence in the shaping of the other. As MacLeod’s depiction of a twentieth century Gaelic community illustrates, the society into which we are born (constructed as it is of language, tradition, convention, and moral codes) has a significant effect not only on how we remember but what we remember. Maurice Halbwachs explains, “the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances of each other. It is not necessary that the group be familiar with them. It suffices that we cannot consider them except from the outside—that is, by putting ourselves in the position of others” (53). In other words, each of our memories can only be recalled and interpreted in relation to “persons, places, dates, words, forms of language, that is to say the whole material and moral life of the societies of which we are part or of which we have been part” (Connerton 36)—including memories of private experiences which are not shared and remain unarticulated.

Throughout a given lifetime, “appropriated” and “personally acquired” memories (Misztal 76) lose their distinctive contours: they blend together in a manner that imitates temporal continuity and wholeness. For clan MacDonald, “[w]hat these descendants of the first immigrants ‘recall’ is not a world that they have seen for themselves but an echo of voices that they have always heard” (Williams 85). Thus it is that the narrator of *No Great Mischief* is able to reconstruct and represent the events of his life, despite the fact that (as he says) “obviously much of this information is not really mine—not in the sense that I experienced it. . . . But still, whatever its inaccuracies, this information has come to be known

in the manner that family members come to know one another because they share such close proximity. Or as Grandma would say, ‘How could you *not* know that?’” (53).

The inscription of the self as repository of collective memory and communal history satisfies the human desire “for a wholeness of experience. . . that would gather up in itself past, present, and future” (Macquarrie 201). Through this concentration of time within the individual, the discursive boundaries between myth and storytelling are irretrievably blurred. Memory mythologizes the past because “myths occur universally throughout human experience” (Falk 129). As MacKinnon observes in “The Closing Down of Summer,” “[T]he private experience, if articulated with skill, may communicate an appeal that is universal beyond the limitations of time or landscape’ (196). In this reading, myth functions as a sort of collective unconscious, shaping and being shaped by human agency. The past is held closely and with great reverence in MacLeod’s invented narrative communities in ways that call to mind Romantic definitions of memory. Such definitions claimed that “each human group must strive after ‘what lies in its bones’” (Miztal 41). This notion of embodied memory seems unexpectedly fitting, particularly for the members of clan MacDonald whose collective experience of the past seems inscribed in their DNA.

Memory functions in the communal history of an oral society in much the same way that autobiographical memory functions in the individual, in which much of the past is forgotten and that which remains is rewritten to accommodate the individual’s perceptions and interpretations of his or her present experience. As Terdiman explains, “the most constant element of recollection is forgetting. . . . Reduction is the essential precondition for representation. Loss is what makes our memory of the past possible at all” (22). Furthermore, “[t]he past exists [in oral cultures] only in so far as it continues to be held in living memory, and it is so remembered only as long as it serves present need” (Miztal 28). It is significant that many of MacLeod’s storytellers’ own sense of their Gaelic culture is

derived from an inherited oral tradition. Unlike print culture, in which knowledge can be preserved in textual repositories of memory, oral culture recognizes the significance and elevates the status of memory—as well as of those who have the responsibility of remembering. Therefore, “oral societies live very much in the present and only with memories which have present relevance and which articulate inconsistent [because always evolving] cultural inheritance” (Miszta 24).

Alexander’s narrative preserves the illusion of an oral recitation. He refers to the “telling” of his story, as well as to those who are “hearing” it (*Mischief* 2), which “invit[es] the reader to imagine an oral community” (Williams 83). The effect of Alexander’s appropriation of and participation in shared communal memories not only locates the contemporary *clann Chalum Ruaidh* within the larger community but within the *clann* mythology, thereby allowing them to transcend time, as the blank spaces that exist beyond personal memory are filled. The MacDonald family’s desire to maintain a connection with their Highland ancestors is expressed in the painful reflections of a dying schoolteacher in “The Road to Rankin’s Point,” who asks, “And what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?” (*Island* 159). He goes on to explain,

I feel myself falling back into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future. My twenty-six years are not enough and I would want to go farther and farther back through previous generations so that I might have more of what now seems so little. (176)

There is, in this lament, the existential desire to transcend temporality that motivates the attempt to both remember and belong to a history beyond one’s own.

For MacLeod, a wider history includes the ongoing and inescapable effect of trauma on his characters’ depiction of their narrative present. A consistent connection between the short stories and the novel is the way in which storytelling allows MacLeod’s characters to

cope with traumatic experiences, whether the event occurred in the recent or distant past, and whether it involves the individual or the community. Through the inscription of Gaelic language in his texts, MacLeod establishes a signifying system in which an endangered cultural narrative can be reclaimed. The inclusion of Gaelic words and phrases in the stories becomes both a reminder of trauma and a means of facing it, for the language connects its speakers with their past, allows them a sense of participating in an unchanging communal narrative, and becomes a language of shared intimacy and experience.

That Gaelic communities in Canada, such as that of Cape Breton Island, have resisted invasive pressures from external influences—most obviously in the preservation of Gaelic as the community’s first language—is a phenomenon that has received much critical attention. This resistance has been compromised in recent times—as Colin Nicholson notes, MacLeod “belongs to the first generation of Nova Scotians not brought up as Gaelic speakers” (“Decline” 43). MacLeod draws attention to the significance of this new privileging of English over Gaelic, referring to the change as the “breakdown of that [Gaelic] culture” (“Alistair” 190). The social and psychological effects of this breakdown on those of Gaelic ancestry register poignantly in his writings, in which Gaelic phrase and language are always present as ghostly reminders of an endangered cultural memory. For many of MacLeod’s narrators, Gaelic is “the language of the heart” (*Mischief* 178), which is “constant and unchanging and speak[s] to [them] as the privately familiar” (*Island* 194). There is a sense of melancholy in the narratives of these English-speaking storytellers: Gaelic forms a “shadow text” in their tales in which their “living possibility is inseparable from because mediated through a cultural past that is paradoxically marked by the sense of an inevitable ending and a simultaneous refusal to let go” (Nicholson “Decline” 44). In keeping with this paradox, MacLeod’s fiction both laments and memorialises Highland culture without being limited by the connotations of separation and “pastness” that are inherent in these terms. His complex

representation of the temporal relationship between individuals and their history (both personal and communal) is an essential element of his fiction, in which the past—even the distant past—is ever present.

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