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# Highlanders and Maritimers in Alistair MacLeod's "Clearances"

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- 1 Alistair MacLeod's reputation as a short story writer began with the publication of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* in 1976, which revolves around the themes of loss, identity, exile and sense of place in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. MacLeod was born in Saskatchewan in 1936 and moved with his family to Cape Breton to live on the family farm. Before becoming a teacher and a writer, he worked as a miner and a fisherman, jobs that were to help him understand workers who struggled every day to survive and provide for their families. Drawing upon this experience, MacLeod's work has extensively focused on the life struggles of the inhabitants of Cape Breton whose local history dates back to the eighteenth-century Highland clearances in Scotland. Many of the Highlanders who were defeated at the battle of Culloden in 1746 were forced into exile and had no other choice but to cross the Atlantic in search of a new life in the colonies. Those who chose Cape Breton in Eastern Canada had to face harsh living conditions and new challenges upon arrival, but they remained loyal to their Scottish origins by preserving their language and culture. The harsh winds and choppy oceans that MacLeod describes in his stories echo those of Scotland, so much so that Colin Nicholson, in one of his articles devoted to Alistair MacLeod's first collection, labelled his stories "elemental fictions" (p. 90). Indeed, MacLeod uses the weather as a metaphor for the hardships of early Canadian settlers and diasporic communities, a metaphor that became one of the dominant features of early Canadian literature. In the 1970s, these features were theorized by Margaret Atwood in her seminal work, *Survival*, in which she argued that "for early settlers and explorers, [survival] meant bare survival in the face of 'hostile elements' and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive" (p. 32). In 1968, MacLeod's first short story, "The Boat", tells the story of a young boy destined to walk in his father's footsteps and become a fisherman. The story focuses on the tight connections between Cape Bretoners, their history and the ocean they depend on for their livelihood. "The Boat" was republished in

*Island: Collected Stories* (2001), a chronologically organized collection of sixteen short stories that includes all the pieces from his earlier collections—*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* (1986)—and two new short stories, “Island” (1988) and “Clearances” (1999). This paper will focus on his last short story, “Clearances”, which concentrates on a nameless protagonist’s inability to come to terms with the changes implied by modernity.

- 2 To this purpose, I will examine the role played by the ocean in the preservation of a Scottish heritage and how it partakes in the restoration of a cultural continuity between Cape Breton and the Scottish Highlands. Even though “Clearances” will remain the main focus of this study, I shall refer to his novel and a few of his previous stories that deal with displacement and collective memory in a similar fashion. First and foremost, I will discuss how the Atlantic Ocean in his story serves a dual purpose to tell stories of loss and displacement on the one hand and reconnection through memory on the other. The second part of this article will examine how the vast distances implied by the ocean call for the narrative reconstruction of a line of filiation between Cape Breton and the Highlands and I will devote the last part of this essay to MacLeod’s narrative representation of the clash between local identity and globalization.

## Memories of the ocean

- 3 Like many of his previous stories, “Clearances” deals with how strongly the past affects the present, and the narrator’s nostalgic tone illustrates the classic theme of regret over the disappearance of an entire tradition or way of life. The opening lines testify to the presence of the past in everyday life:

In the early morning he was awakened by the dog’s pulling at the Condon’s woollen blanket, which was the top covering upon his bed. The blanket was now a sort of yellow-beige although at one time, he thought, it must have been white. The blanket was made from the wool of the sheep he and his wife used to keep and it was now over half a century old. When they used to shear the sheep in the spring they would set aside some of the best fleeces and send them to Condon’s Woollen Mill in Charlottetown; and after some months, it seemed miraculously, the box of blankets would arrive. (p. 413)

- 4 While MacLeod often uses the first person in his earlier stories such as “The Boat” or “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” to depict personal experience, he resorts to the third-person in “Clearances” in order to set an anonymous character in opposition with his environment and his time. The verbs “used to” and “would” refer to an outdated time of hard outdoor work while the worn blanket is the metaphor for the gradual disappearance of an intricately woven existence of routine and ritual. Instead of telling the story through the subjective viewpoint of one of his narrators or characters, MacLeod focuses here on the subjected character who has no other choice but to accept change and “go forward”. In this respect, the story is in keeping with the rest of the collection insofar as it continues to foreground some of MacLeod’s favourite topics such as the individual’s struggle to cope with the social, economic and cultural transformations brought about by modernity and globalization.
- 5 MacLeod’s “Clearances” can be roughly divided into three main parts that recount the character’s departure to Europe during World War II and his return to Canada. When he wakes up one morning, the character journeys into the past: he recalls his first trip to a

woollen mill on Prince Edward Island with his wife, the death of his wife ten years before the time of the narrative and his childhood when he used to go fishing with his father and grandfather. The second part of the short story relates his departure to Europe and his experience during World War II. He eventually manages to obliterate the horrors of the war from his memory, but he holds on to the only valuable memory of his experience in Europe: his trip to the Highlands when he was on furlough in London. The final section deals with his return to Canada after the war and the crises he had to face, namely the death of his son and ensuing loss of the land he had given him by passing it on to his daughter-in-law, the fishing quotas that prevented his other son from living off the sea and the increasing number of tourists who are ready to pay a generous amount of money for land with an ocean view.

- 6 The pivotal middle section of the short story recounts his experience at Ardnamurchan in the Scottish Highlands during the war. The character reconnects with a collective past that gives meaning and substance to the present. It is during his stay at Ardnamurchan that he grasps the original meaning of "clearance":

Where once people had lived in their hundreds and their thousands, there now stretched only the unpopulated emptiness of the vast estates with their sheep-covered hills or the islands which had become bird sanctuaries or shooting ranges for the well-to-do. He saw himself as the descendant of victims of history and changing economic times, betrayed, perhaps, by politics and poverty as well. (p. 420)

- 7 The transition in this passage from the collective ("people", "their hundreds", "their sheep-covered hills") to the individual ("He saw himself...") adds a mirror effect to the story, as what he finds in the Highlands is in fact the retroactive collective reflection of his individual self. Cape Breton and the Highlands are divided by the Atlantic Ocean which acts as a mirror where the present opens a window onto the past. In Ardnamurchan, he imagines his family on the opposite side of the ocean: "he looked across the western ocean, beyond the point of Ardnamurchan, and tried to visualize Cape Breton and his family at their tasks" (p. 421). And when he returns to Cape Breton, the view of the ocean triggers his memory of Scotland: "he would look across the ocean, imagining he could see the point of Ardnamurchan and beyond" (p. 422). For MacLeod, the ocean serves to mark a spatial and temporal difference that establishes the Highlands as a land of origins and Cape Breton as the island of its direct descendants. In this respect, he writes against the grain of twentieth-century poststructuralist thought that problematized the concept of origin and questioned its very existence.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, MacLeod's connection between Cape Breton and Highland culture cannot be made without postulating the existence of a historical origin. The character's position on either side of the ocean creates a mirror effect that constricts the geographical space between Cape Breton and the Highlands and serves to show how illusory the distinction is between the two. The ocean may indeed be a powerful geographical barrier, but it fails to resist historical and cultural connections.
- 8 It is also important to bear in mind that oceans and seas are different—and not only in scale. In his introduction to *The Sea: Thalassography and Historiography*, Peter N. Miller extensively discusses these differences along with the influence oceans and seas have had on historiography:

For while oceans are big history, seas are small-scale history. Oceans are the grand narrative, seas the microhistories. In other words, the sea can be viewed as the mirror image of the ocean: smaller, with identifiable networks, and full of local

meaning. Let us be clear: seas are small *only* in comparison with oceans. This is microhistory only because of the density of available historical texture. But the move to the smaller scale is also a move to a different kind of history, one tuned more closely to questions of the relationships *between*. (2013, p. 10)

- 9 In other words, oceans suggest vast geographical spaces that sever the ties between the countries they separate while seas involve stronger local relationships and connections. For Miller, microhistories are made possible thanks to the “available historical texture” of important seas like the Mediterranean. The abundance of historical events, discourses and representations characterizing the Mediterranean Sea strengthens the connections between border countries, unlike oceans which, for MacLeod, evoke permanent displacement, loss and nostalgia for an idealized past. Indeed, the sea in MacLeod’s work is full of local meaning and associated with experiences of struggle and strife, while the ocean is the narrative of separation and displacement that seeks to reconnect Cape Breton to a larger history. This gaze to the East is in fact a way of positing the historical anteriority of Cape Breton’s Scottish heritage over more recent national developments.
- 10 Another important feature of the ocean is the contact zone it implies, the shore. Gillian Mary Hanson’s work on riverbanks and seashores in nineteenth and twentieth-century British literature argues that the seaside setting is culturally associated with memory: “The seaside setting is also the place where memory is evoked. These evocations take on the rhythm of the waves themselves, each born upon the retreat of the former, approaching and receding as past is brought into the present.” (2006, p. 134) The seashore is the place where the liquid and the mineral interact and where the past slowly erodes the present. By using the ocean as a reminder of Scottish displacement, the narrator takes on a bardic function. In her extensive study of Scottish literature and Romanticism, Katie Trumpener defines the bard as “the mouthpiece for a whole society, articulating its values, chronicling its history, and mourning the inconsolable tragedy of its collapse” (1997, p. 6). MacLeod’s bardic narrator serves to question the survival of a tradition threatened by the many changes caused by the growing interaction with the outside world at the turn of the twenty-first century. Like the shore itself, the character is caught in a liminal space between memories of the past and strong doubts about the future, and if MacLeod resorts to the third person in this short story, it is to voice the silence of many Cape Bretoners who are unable to come to terms with what MacLeod believes to be the modern world’s attempts to erode local memory and culture.

## A Bard’s tale

- 11 The bardic narrator laments the loss of a traditional lifestyle based on hard work and Scottish heritage. The maritime provinces have indeed suffered the most from the development of the cities to the west that eventually claimed cultural and artistic hegemony. While cities like Montreal and Toronto grew into thriving business and cultural centres after Confederation in 1867, the maritime provinces to the east were left to their traditional lifestyles and economic decline. In her polemical introduction to *Under Eastern Eyes*, Janice Kulyk Keefer writes about some of the decisions maritime writers had to make if they wanted to attract readers:

Traditionally, Maritime writers have been faced with as difficult a choice: whether to leave their native region in order to work in more varied and sophisticated cultural centres—Toronto, Montreal—as did Charles Bruce and Hugh MacLennan, Ray Smith and Antonine Maillet, for example—or whether, like Ernest Buckler,

Alden Nowlan, and David Adams Richards, to 'stand by their land,' however problematic such fidelity might prove for their writing. (1988, p. 18)

- 12 MacLeod definitely belongs to the latter group, next to writers like Ernest Buckler whose *The Mountain and the Valley* is set in a farming community in the Nova Scotia countryside and David Adams Richards who, in the Miramichi Trilogy, lends his voice to the poverty-stricken underclass of New Brunswick. Although both writers were committed realists who aimed at portraying the living conditions of the working classes, they experimented with narrative technique to voice the concerns of their subdued maritime characters who would otherwise remain silent. In a similar fashion, the silence of maritime communities prompted MacLeod to play a bardic role and compensate for the inarticulateness of the masculine maritime character whose memory and identity have been affected by years of poverty and indifference. Rebuilding a maritime identity for MacLeod means rebuilding the lost ties with Scotland and restoring cultural continuity by first constricting the space symbolized by the ocean.
- 13 MacLeod's fiction is primarily concerned with filiation and many of his short stories question the ambivalent relationship between an individual and his or her family. For instance, the narrator of "The Boat" is caught between his mother's desire for him to pursue a traditional lifestyle and become a fisherman and his father's wish to see him grow into something more. The tightly knit connections that characterize Cape Breton families echo the lifestyle of the clan, and MacLeod's only novel, *No Great Mischief* (1999), shows how strongly the survival of the community relies on family ties. It tells the story of Alexander MacDonald who belongs to the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* and is known as *gille beag ruadh*, "the little red boy" because of the colour of his hair. Very much like the short story that narrates the character's departure to Scotland and his return, the novel oscillates between the late 1990s, the present of the framing narrative, and the eighteenth-century Highland clearances when the narrator's great-great-great-grandfather, *Calum Ruadh*, was forced out of Scotland and crossed the Atlantic to settle in Cape Breton in 1779. The ties that remain are obviously those of the clan but MacLeod goes further to discuss cultural continuity in genetic terms. In his article on orality in *No Great Mischief* entitled "From Clan to Nation", David Williams insists on how words are associated in the novel with organic cells and DNA: "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." (2001, p. 55) Genetics involves the repetitions and patterns that safeguard cultural transmission. In the third chapter of the novel, the narrator describes the physical characteristics of the clan members, mainly those pertaining to hair colour and the tendency to have twins, in order to blur the distinction between individual and community—clan culture is symbolically woven into the characters' genetic makeup—and laud the clan's resistance to cultural dilution into a larger, more national order. However, genetic transmission has its weaknesses and can be affected by change and mutation. The novel and the short story share the notion that cultural continuity is bound to be threatened by the outside world of exchange and exogamy. In *No Great Mischief*, Alexander MacDonald moves to Toronto to become an orthodontist and his twin sister Catherine marries a petroleum engineer and moves to Calgary. When they meet and reminisce, the dialogue is oriented towards an idealized past of meaningful relationships and family cohesion.
- 14 In "Clearances", it is exogamy that chips away the family land. The character has two sons, but his elder son falls from his rooftop while cleaning the chimney one day and dies.

Out of guilt, he gives his son's land to his daughter-in-law, who will later remarry and sell "her property to a surly summer couple who erected a seven-foot privacy fence and kept a sullen pitbull who paced restlessly behind it" (p. 423). When a real estate agent pays a visit to the character with a German couple, his younger son John takes his father aside to evoke the possibility of a future transaction and the necessity to "go forward". The father feels betrayed by his own son and walks down to his fishing shanty to journey back into the past and remember times of family and communal unity. The modern world of global exchange and transaction is here depicted in its most threatening features as it jeopardizes traditional family structures. As a condensed form, each of the short story's developments has a specific meaning and the polysemic title of the story serves to link new events to other forms of clearance. Not only does the term recall the historical clearances from the Highlands, it also predicts his future clearance from his property, instilling the character and the readers alike with uncanny feelings of *déjà-vu*.

- 15 MacLeod draws a great deal of his inspiration from Highland myths and legends, so much so that the developments of his stories can often be read as new variants of a much older story. The story of the legendary dog called *Cù Sith* who would roam the Highlands as a figure of impending death is retold and rewritten in MacLeod's fiction. Very much like the mythical creatures of Highland folklore, dogs and animals play a crucial role in Cape Breton culture and literature as they become figures of cultural continuity. MacLeod's stories often portray huge, powerful dogs that determine the outcome of the story, whether it is the *cù mòr glas a'bhàis* of "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" or the terrifying pitbull of "Clearances."
- 16 Dogs ensure continuity and have a narrative function in many of MacLeod's stories. "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" starts with the story of the *cù mòr glas a'bhàis*, the big grey dog of death and omen of impending doom. The form of the tale is identifiable at the start of the story: the characters are referred to as "the man", "the dog" and "the family" and the text begins with "Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea". As the story goes, a man was very fond of his big grey dog who grew to such "a tremendous height" that she was unable to mate with ordinary male dogs because of their small size. When the spring came, the dog disappeared and gave birth to her pups on one of the small offshore islands. One day, when the man and his two sons were fishing, they got caught in a heavy wind and were forced to wait out the storm on the very island where the dog had found shelter. When the dog saw her former master, she ran to him, knocking him over in her excitement, but the scene is finally misinterpreted by her six full-grown pups as an attack that results in the man's violent death. The dogs are never seen again and the readers discover, in the second half of the story, that the man was in fact the narrator's great-great-great-grandfather. The framed third-person narrative of the big grey dog switches to a first-person narrator who is standing beside his father's bed at the hospital with his five grey-haired brothers. This scene with the father and his six grey-haired sons repeats the story of the *cù mòr glas a'bhàis* and her six young pups. MacLeod includes communal stories and legends from the past to better illustrate the central role of repetition and story-telling in the preservation of cultural identity.
- 17 The second section of "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" foregrounds the act of story-telling and epitomizes the importance of orality and language in cultural transmission. Indeed, MacLeod's fiction abounds with proverbs and songs that both have the advantage of resisting change. Walter Ong's study of orality, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the*



Word, lays emphasis on the importance of repetition in oral cultures: "In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration." (1982, p. 24) The character's interaction with his dog in "Clearances" is one example among many others of the patterns and repetitions that keep a community together. The shepherd he meets in Scotland addresses his dog affectionately by saying "*S'e thu fhein a tha tapaidh* (It is yourself that is smart)", and when years later the neighbour's pitbull escapes from the property next door, the character addresses his own shepherd dog in the exact same way to appease his fear and raise his spirits. MacLeod's use of Gaelic unsettles the readers and introduces them to a foreign language that bears secret knowledge within it. The unfamiliar sounds of the phrase and even its antiquated translation pinpoint the existence of a meaning that has been lost in translation. Polyglossia in MacLeod's text becomes an act of resistance against more dominant languages such as English that help to maintain political domination over minority cultures.<sup>2</sup> Gaelic is an essential element in MacLeod's Romantic portrait of Highland culture and language,<sup>3</sup> but such incursions into the past can be helpful and risky at the same time. They can indeed have the effect of dwelling on memories of the past to the detriment of an articulation between past and present that would lay the groundwork for a viable future. Trumpener recalls how the colonized people's "refusal to relinquish the memory of a prequest society dooms them, personally and collectively, to a shadowy half-life, caught between past and present", even though such a refusal also has the advantage of keeping "alive the hope of future autonomy" and blocking "the conquerors' narratives of triumph and progress" (1997, p. 29). In "Clearances" however, the many losses the character has been forced to endure sets him aside from the rest of the community that has accepted to go forward.

## Eroding the past

- 18 The character's property "runs down to the ocean" where the ebb and flow recall the back and forth movements of memory and time. As mentioned earlier, the shore is a changing contact zone where the ocean slowly erodes and transforms land. Erosion serves as a structural metaphor in this short story insofar as the ocean's erosion of the land evokes the slow erosion of the past by the present. The very meanings of the terms the character uses to refer to his environment are slowly eroded and replaced with new meanings and new values. MacLeod draws the readers' attention to the polysemy of words such as clearances—associated with farming, trade and the displacement of the Highlanders in the eighteenth century—to represent the impermanence of meaning. The spread of capitalism and the advent of consumer society after World War II gave rise to a powerful middle class that can now profit from a wide range of commodities made possible by contemporary globalisation. For MacLeod, the ensuing development of white-collar jobs has led to a modern worldview that challenges traditional meanings and a blatant example is the ocean itself. While the ocean is associated by the character with hard work and livelihood, the German couple offering to buy off the land sees the ocean as a mere commodity. While earlier Romantics represented the ocean as a dark and powerful element designed to awaken feelings of the sublime in onlookers, the German couple sees little more than a landscape to be enjoyed. This fictional world of heteroglossia where words are polysemic testify to the changing nature of words and the



values they convey. Unstable meaning is a central theme of "The Boat" which commemorates local dependence on the sea and the ocean. The lobster that used to be a staple food that only the poor would eat in the early twentieth century turns into a fashionable Canadian delicacy with the advent of consumer society and its laws of supply and demand. Even though "The Boat" was written in the sixties, MacLeod was already highly critical of the results of transforming the crustacean into a global commodity:

The lobster beds off the Cape Breton coast are still very rich and now, from May to July, their offerings are packed in crates of ice, and thundered by the gigantic transport trucks, day and night, through New Glasgow, Amherst, Saint John and Bangor and Portland and into Boston where they are tossed still living into boiling pots of water, their final home. (p. 24)

19 The narrator poses this transformation from a traditional lifestyle to a modern global market as a desecration of the ocean and its "offerings". The passive here alludes to the unidentifiable marketplaces that rule the economy and the polysyndeton in the final sentence illustrates the intricacies of a global market that ignores local culture. The narrator exposes a conflict between a local community who has developed an intimate and historical connection with its environment and a global market that plans to commodify it.

20 The ocean is not the only element in "Clearances" to be subjected to global capitalism as the land itself is presented as a commodity. The young local clear-cutter who offers to clear the character's land of its spruce trees evokes the massive invasion of tourists:

The tourists were a sore point with some people. They had begun to flood into what they saw as prime recreation area, marvelling at the pristine water and the unpolluted air. Many of them were from the New England area and an increasing number from Europe. They slept late and often complained about the whine of the clear-cutters' saws. (p. 425)

21 The "Park", that is to say the sections of the land used for tourism, is later compared to a "slow-moving glacier" (p. 426) that threatens to swallow up the land and force the father out of his property. Tourism has the eroding powers of the ocean and is accused of invading local space and culture. As a form of leisure, tourism downplays the father's traditional values of hard, physically challenging work as opposed to modern white-collar city dwellers. In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry problematizes tourism and explains how the tourist's gaze is "visually objectified or captured through photographs, postcards, films, models [...]" that "enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured" (2002, p. 3). While Urry analyses tourism from a sociological viewpoint, MacLeod, as a short story writer, focuses on the dangers of allowing tourists to objectify local people, undermine the local work ethic and alter collective memory as a result. This derogatory view of tourism and the modernity it is associated with results from its opposition to tradition. In his extensive work on memory and history, Paul Ricœur defines modernity as the crossing of that moment in time when novelty clashes with tradition and consigns it to the past and subsequent oblivion.<sup>4</sup> The character's very existence in the short story becomes a hopeless act of resistance against modernity and the gradual shrinking of his culture and environment. As open-ended as it may seem, the story's outcome is clear as to what awaits its protagonist.

22 Before short stories peaked in the 1940s with magazines such as *Preview* and *First Statement*, they had helped to convey a particular sense of place in order to familiarize Canadians with their own country. Even though the length of the short story has varied considerably over time, it was length that called for structure, thematic unity and a

convincing conclusion or epiphany. The outcome of "Clearances" conveys a cyclical and ironic vision of history that condemns Highlanders and their descendants to forced migration and displacement. After the exchange with his son and the real estate agent, the character and his dog end up facing the neighbour's pitbull who has managed to escape from the neighbour's property:

He felt the dog grow tense beside him and emit a low growl. He turned to see his neighbour's pitbull advancing towards them. The large beast wore a collar covered with pointed studs and moved with deliberate measured steps. Its huge jaws were clenched firmly and strings of saliva hung, like beaded curtains, from its bloated, purple lips. (p. 430)

- 23 Dog specialists trace the pitbull back to England where bull dogs were mixed with other terrier types to fight bulls for popular entertainment. Even though these fights were banned in England as early as 1835, the dog's reputation as a particularly aggressive animal never died out. The fact that this hellish dog is of English descent is no coincidence and adds a degree of cosmic irony to the story. MacLeod's idea of having his character relive the fate of the Highlanders who were forced out of their country by the English is part of his narrative plan to restore the line of filiation between Scots and Cape Bretoners. The correlation between heredity and memory is an old debate that dates back to Buffon's work in natural history during the French Enlightenment. In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward W. Said discusses the problematic of historical and cultural filiation in the light of Buffon's work as a naturalist. Said recalls:

Buffon's explanation [...] that heredity, the pressure on the offspring, was guided by memory. Reproduction was the process by which organized elements from one generation were transmitted into the next generation; since this process was clearly not random, and since filiation involved strong resemblance if not always actual repetition, Buffon and Maupertuis postulated a faculty, memory, whose function it was to direct the transmission of generations. (1991, p. 115)

- 24 In "Clearances," individual and collective memory is an essential part of local identity and the narrator elicits a pattern of historical repetition to foreshadow the character's demise at the end of the story. In other words, local resistance to change, social reorganization and economic modernisation can only lead to disappointment and destruction. The character's predicament repeats the eighteenth-century Highland clearances that triggered a series of reforms to rationalise the economy by having the remaining local inhabitants turn to enclosures and sheep raising and discard clan culture and feudalism. In Canadian literature, MacLeod takes the opposite view from a writer like Hugh MacLennan who was also of Scottish descent. For MacLennan, Highland culture belonged to the past and had no rightful place in a modern nation. *Each Man's Son*, the only novel he set in Cape Breton, begins with a prologue that portrays a superstitious, curse-ridden people and he goes even further in *Seven Rivers of Canada*, the travel book he published in 1963, in which he writes that the Highlanders' blind loyalty to their chiefs and their Pretender during the 1745 rebellion "had given the English no choice save to uproot and destroy the ancient clan system" (1963, p. 116), thereby clearing the English of any blame in the matter. As a liberal humanist, MacLennan believed in a strong, centralized, and therefore modern state that should pay little heed to local claims. MacLeod's insistence on the importance of preserving local identity, culture and language is simply incompatible with MacLennan's definition of a modern nation. Aware that the world was changing in the sixties and turning into an electronic village, MacLennan argued that only Canada as a unified nation could face the challenges of globalisation.<sup>5</sup> MacLeod's texts, on the other hand, estheticize local spaces and challenge such views that

national recognition of distinct identities and languages can threaten a nation with division and separation. If his short stories are widely read today, it is mainly because they draw the readers' attention to the complex relationship between the local and the global, not to mention the articulation between long-term memory and historical change.

- 25 Recent debates around globalisation have broached the concept of territory and its relationship with the outside world. For Christian Grataloup, a contemporary French specialist in geohistory, territory is an expression of duration. It is central to the birth and development of a group's identity and defined by long-term memory and history. For him, territories imply slow changes rather than rapid transformations, which is why they are the most likely to conflict with what can be considered as acentric globalization.<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft's definition of globalization as "the radical *transformation* of imperialism, continually reconstituted, and interesting precisely because it stems from no obvious imperial centre" (2001, p. 213) also supports the argument that globalization aspires to transcend and downplay the value of territory. MacLeod's short story remains an illustration of this conflict between the local and the global and the outcome of "Clearances" reflects his fears regarding the survival of local culture and identity. The narrator not only relates the debasing commodification of the character's environment, but he also pinpoints the fear of all small-sized communities of being overpowered by new forms of imperialism. In a way, the fear of cultural extinction that MacLeod depicts in his stories stems from feelings of historical *déjà-vu* that construe globalization as a Trojan horse bearing the return of imperialism.
- 26 MacLeod's short stories have become popular by addressing the readers' fears of being subjected to changes caused by unidentifiable powers. In "Clearances", the refusal to "go forward", an expression first used by the character's grandfather in the story, has disastrous consequences for the protagonist and change is seen as essentially negative. The present has little meaning in this story except to repeat the past and scar the protagonist, which is one of the reasons why his work every so often indulges in excessive Romantic overtones. As Bill Ashcroft also implies in *Post-Colonial Transformation*, globalization and modernity are not the ruthless pitbull behind the fence, nor do they aim at excluding the local. In fact, MacLeod's stories may very well illustrate a blatant contradiction insofar as he owes his renown to a transnational readership that would not exist without mass communication and globalization. His stories have been translated into over fifteen languages and the mass consumption so often criticized in his work has had the opposite effect of revaluing local spaces and art forms that readers have come to associate with authenticity. Moreover, the eighteenth-century Highland clearances failed to eradicate Highland culture and, however painful these clearances may have been, they were responsible for its growth and development across the Atlantic. Alice Munro's short stories are of course an obvious example of this development in Canada and like MacLeod, she often wrote about her Scottish heritage. Her foreword to *The View from Castle Rock* recounts her travel to Scotland where she revisited her family's past and discovered that she was the descendant of a long line of Scots who "went in for writing long, outspoken, sometimes outrageous letters, and detailed recollections" (2006, p. IX). Her short stories, just like MacLeod's, confirm that the quest for origins remains a major component of contemporary Canadian writing and has even largely contributed to its reputation worldwide.

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## NOTES

1. In the 1960s, French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida wrote extensively on the concept of origin. In their respective works, the concept of origin was derived from and thereby downplayed by larger notions of difference and historicity.
2. In his work on language and power relations, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that political domination chiefly depends on the recognition by minority cultures of a single dominant language. "*L'intégration dans une même communauté linguistique, qui est un*

*produit de la domination politique sans cesse reproduit par des institutions capables d'imposer la reconnaissance universelle de la langue dominante, est la condition de l'instauration de rapports de domination linguistique.*" (2001, p. 71)

3. Similar literary incursions into the past can be traced back to the eighteenth century with James MacPherson's *Ossian* that still remains an instructive example of rising Romantic aspirations to delve into the past and celebrate Celtic landscapes and oral cultures.

4. This study of the passage from tradition to modernity can be found in Paul Ricœur's *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*: "Ce seuil [de la modernité] est franchi lorsque l'idée de nouveauté reçoit pour contraire celle de tradition, laquelle, de simple transmission d'héritage est devenue synonyme de résistance aux idées et aux mœurs nouvelles." (2000, pp. 403-4)

5. MacLennan exposed these views in *The Colour of Canada*, a photography book that was published in 1967, the same year Canada celebrated the Centennial and organized the World Fair. In the book, he expresses his concerns about the re-emergence of nationalist movements in Quebec and in the West in the sixties.

6. Christian Grataloup's insights into the changes resulting from globalization can be read in *Géohistoire de la mondialisation : le temps long du monde*: the milieu is "une dimension essentielle de la fabrique de la communauté. On est là plus du côté de la reproduction d'une génération à l'autre, de la durée d'une société dans le temps long où le changement se fait lentement et avance le plus souvent masqué, plutôt que du côté de la transformation, des mutations rapides et parfois brutales. Le territoire, ne serait-ce que par la permanence du nom [...], incarne largement la durée" (2015, p. 300).

## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines how Canadian writer Alistair MacLeod, in his latest short story entitled "Clearances", attempts to reconnect the twentieth-century maritime culture of Cape Breton, Canada, to an idealized Scottish past that dates back to the eighteenth-century clearances of the Highlands. Along with *No Great Mischief*, the only novel he published in his lifetime, his short stories tackle the themes of displacement, forced migration and collective memory. After focusing on the role played by the Atlantic Ocean in his short stories as a reminder of historical and cultural displacement, this study will explore how MacLeod's "Clearances" reconstructs a forgotten line of filiation between Cape Breton and the Highlands that sends characters and readers back and forth in time. MacLeod's purpose to emphasize the prime importance of local culture is twofold: his stories not only serve to resist oblivion, they also express a refusal to surrender to the powerful pressures of a present-day process of globalization that challenges and threatens the survival of local identities.

Ce travail propose d'examiner l'une des dernières nouvelles de l'auteur canadien Alistair MacLeod, intitulée *Clearances*, et son projet de reconstruire le lien entre la culture néo-écossaise de l'île canadienne du Cap-Breton à la fin du vingtième siècle et un passé écossais idéalisé qui remonte aux « Clearances » du dix-huitième siècle. Tout comme son roman intitulé *No Great Mischief*, le seul qu'il écrira dans sa carrière, ses nouvelles abordent les thèmes du déplacement forcé, de la migration et de la mémoire collective. Une analyse du rôle que joue l'océan Atlantique en tant qu'appel au récit du déplacement forcé de cette communauté sera suivie d'une étude plus approfondie de la reconstruction d'une filiation entre le Cap-Breton et les Highlands qui permet aux personnages et aux lecteurs de voyager dans un passé collectif. L'auteur choisit

cette thématique de la culture locale pour deux raisons : elle permet non seulement de résister au temps et à l'oubli, mais elle vise aussi à exprimer un refus de plier sous la pression d'une mondialisation qui semble menacer la survie des identités locales.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Écosse, Highlands, Canada, océan, local, nouvelles

**Keywords:** Scotland, Highlands, Canada, ocean, local, short Story

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