# "Hoping to strike some sort of solidity": The Shifting Fictions of Alistair MacLeod

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IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS, short story writers from the Maritimes have been winning increasingly wide recognition for their work. Collections of short fiction by Elizabeth Brewster, Carol Bruneau, Sheldon Currie, Leo McKay, Alden Nowlan, David Adams Richards, and Budge Wilson — to name just a few — have received enthusiastic reviews and in some cases national recognition.[1] But perhaps one of the best known and most carefully scrutinized writers of short fiction in the Maritimes is Alistair MacLeod. MacLeod's solid reputation is clearly not due to profuseness. Through the seventies and early eighties he averaged one story a year and has published only two collections, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (1986), each of which includes seven narratives. But if his output has been relatively small, the texts have been crafted so carefully that they have been greeted enthusiastically by critics. Twice his stories have been included in the prestigious anthology *Best American Short Stories*, and several of his texts, most notably "The Boat," have been widely anthologized. While Maritime writers of short fiction have often been overlooked by the academic community, MacLeod's work has been examined in more than a dozen full-length critical articles. As tends to be the case when scholars examine collections of short stories, critics have adopted one of two approaches when exploring MacLeod's fiction. Some, like James Taylor and Simone Vauthier, have focussed on particular stories and examined MacLeod's imagery and symbolism, or his complex reshaping of space and time. Other critics, including Colin Nicholson, John Ditsky, Janice Kulyk Keefer, and Francis Berces, have examined the body of work as a whole, and identified the formal tensions, thematic concerns, and philosophic issues that recur in the texts.

The broad overviews of MacLeod's narratives have generally been productive, for compared to some writers there is a surprising uniformity within his fiction. Nearly all of MacLeod's stories are related by or focalized through male narrators who either are young or are remembering a critical moment of their youth. These male protagonists are inevitably threatened by such deterministic forces as a daunting environment, economic hardship, chronic poverty, or cultural narrow-mindedness, and while the heroes are inevitably compelled to compromise their value system, they usually make decisions that establish their identities and set them, however tentatively, on their path into the future. This recurring exploration of a young individual's struggle within harsh circumstances validates Keefer's observation that, when compared to earlier Maritime writers whose optimism was evident throughout their texts, MacLeod is "closer to [Alden] Nowlan in his engagement with the inevitable, intolerable real, the poverty which defines his people" (182). And given the grim tone of MacLeod's fiction, it is not surprising that Arnold Davidson should argue that both collections are anchored in a "poetics of loss," an aesthetic in which "displacement, substitution and elision... give these stories a characteristic elegiac tone... a present awareness of a past heritage of loss, a continuity, so to speak, of dispossession" (41).

But if MacLeod repeatedly examines similar themes and issues, it would be a mistake to assume that his two collections are built on the same philosophic or ideological paradigm. He consistently addresses questions of identity and examines the threatening power of external forces, but between the two collections there has been a distinct epistemological and political shift, which has yet to be examined. Compared to the persistent note of skepticism, doubt, and uncertainty which characterizes *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,* the later stories in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* signal a clear and confident epistemological shift toward certainty. While such early fictions as "In the Fall," "The Vastness of the Dark," and "The Boat" focus on the lonely trials of isolated individuals who exercise their limited personal freedom to achieve only an incomplete sense of connection with their larger society, the more recent stories, "The Closing Down of Summer," "The Tuning of Perfection," "Second Spring," and "Vision" concentrate on the ways in which individual protagonists are tied more firmly to a larger community.[2] This later emphasis on communal structures is attended by a shift toward more conservative and patriarchal ideologies.

Throughout the early part of his career, MacLeod unwaveringly followed

the tenets which govern the genre of realism. Given the insistence of post-structuralist thinkers that "reality" itself cannot be located in a stable exterior world, but rather is a constantly fluctuating construct of the dominant culture, we can no longer accept the notion developed by such critics as Rene Wellek that a "realist text" is primarily mimetic and strives to be a "truthful representation of the real world" (228). A "realist" text can never produce a truthful version of the "real world," but rather becomes a reproduction of what the author and broader society perceive to be "real." Thus, through particular formal devices, realism strives to achieve a surface appearance of objectivity, but it is, in fact, inherently tied to the ideological. Characterized in part by their traditionally clear and direct style, realist texts also typically assume that the individual subject operates within an objectively constant world, and that the subject is enmeshed in the contexts of history.[3] Both of these assumptions resonate strongly in MacLeod's early stories. Given his initial interest in exploring the lonely struggles of individuals who achieve only an incomplete sense of connection to the larger world, it is not surprising that MacLeod should feel an affinity with a form which often foregrounds the integrity of the speaking subject by focusing on a single central protagonist in order to chronicle his or her maturation or development.

More importantly for MacLeod, realism is a form which is deeply embedded in the assumptions of historicism, as can be seen in the genre's overwhelming concern with tracing lines of cause and effect. Erich Auerbach argues that the emergence of German historicism "laid the aesthetic foundation for modern realism" by demonstrating that for the contemporary reader particular events become comprehensible only as they are seen to be partial links in a larger economic and historical chain (391). The realist text is created within this awareness of "the subsurface movement and the unfolding of historical forces," and creates a credible portrait of the world by ensuring that the events and characters of the narrative are embedded in specific social and temporal contexts (391). The stories which form *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, in particular, are untroubled by even a shadow of the formulaic romance; each of the early stories is committed to tracing the relentless historical forces that press upon the complex, multi-dimensional protagonists, whose experiences and decisions are situated in a complex web of cause and effect. In these realist narratives an attempt is made to document how each event has its origins in a previous context — how each character's thoughts and actions are the result of that individual's past. Of course, MacLeod's realist texts can never provide a "truthful" record of history, any more than they can

provide a complete and faithful reflection of reality, but nonetheless, the assumptions arising from historicism have had a deep impact on his early fictions.

In *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,* MacLeod, as we shall see, attempts to articulate a liberal vision of individual freedom, but he is also intent on exploring the forces that threaten the individual.[4] In the first collection, MacLeod fuses two branches of realist fiction as he blends a psychological realism — which attends to the inner lives of his emotionally and spiritually anxious protagonists — with a naturalistic tendency to explore and chronicle the impact of the environmental forces on the individual. Indeed, environmental conditions are at times so powerful that the texts almost suggest that individual freedom is subsumed in the numerous pressures of immediate circumstance: "His characters are critically vulnerable to if not determined by environmental conditions... and are well within reach of devastating economic poverty" (Berces 116). Many separate forces act upon MacLeod's heroes. Most immediately apparent is the harsh natural environment that daily threatens the fishers, miners, and farmers of Cape Breton. There is nothing in MacLeod's world that would echo Ernest Buckler's nostalgic hymns to an idealized natural landscape, or approach Charles Bruce's romanticized celebrations of the humane farmlands of the Channel Shore. Nature's ability to bend and warp the vulnerable human is evident in "The Boat," as the narrator recalls the ocean's effect on his father's body:

> My father did not tan — he never tanned — because of his reddish complexion, and the salt water irritated his skin as it had for sixty years. He burned and reburned over and over again and his lips still cracked so that they bled when he smiled, and his arms, especially the left, still broke out into the oozing salt-water boils as they had ever since as a child I had first watched him soaking and bathing them in a variety of ineffectual solutions. (121)

MacLeod's narratives are populated with older characters, whose scarred bodies show visible signs of the world's harsh power (Berces 117). Hard labour as a stevedore has reshaped the body of James's father in "In the Fall," so that his "left hand is larger than his right and his left arm is about three inches longer than normal" (8). Similarly, a mining accident maims the father in "The Vastness of the Dark," "ripp[ing] the first two fingers from his scarred right hand" (25). And if the individuals are lucky enough to escape external scarring, the environment may exact an emotional or spiritual toll as numerous characters take to drink, or fly from their Cape

Breton homes in a futile attempt to escape their fates. The environment is not demonized, but the natural world is unrelenting, dangerous, and devouring. The raging seas and unstable mines make manifest the force of chaos, which underlies nature's drive to assimilate and extinguish. As Berces astutely notes, "Two factors exerting constant nihilistic pressure are the proximity of most characters to survival conditions and, secondly, death itself, the final elemental darkness threatening to reduce all hopes to one uniform and meaningless conclusion" (Berces 116). The sense of hesitation and anxiety which characterizes the region's cultural landscape in the post-war era is crystallized in the difficult conditions which the settings establish.

As if the harsh environment were not enough to convince the reader that a sense of fatalism underpins these early stories, the protagonists are also keenly aware of the economic forces which shape or rule human choices. In the story "In the Fall," James, David, and their father would like to save their faithful and loyal pony from the slaughterhouse. But the family's poverty not only forces the father to leave the island for long periods of time to work in Halifax, it also necessitates that they sacrifice any sentimental feelings for an animal which will "probably die in March after we've fed him all that time" (9). Economic pressures threaten to overwhelm MacLeod's characters and force them to read their lives as meaningless. Similarly, young James in "The Vastness of the Dark" is driven by his desire to be independent from his family, but the closure of the mines and the fact that "there was never anything for one to do here" necessitates his departure from Nova Scotia (37). Interestingly, MacLeod tends to represent the economic and the environmental forces in similar ways; they are viewed as inevitable, natural conditions beyond the sphere of influence of the local community. MacLeod's economic determinism is not accompanied by a politicized analysis of capital or class, and the texts would not fit comfortably into the genre of social realism that emerged in the early twentieth century. Certainly, MacLeod presents the miners, fishers, and farmers as figures with an inherent worth and dignity, but Marxist frameworks have little currency in his fiction. He is more interested in the workers as individuals than as representatives of the proletariat.

Even more powerful than the natural and economic forces are the cultural expectations that dictate the behaviours of the protagonists. Though James, in "The Vastness of the Dark," attempts to sound "as offhand as possible" when he declares "I think I'll go away today," he has mistakenly accepted his father's claim that he is "free to go if you want to," and completely underestimates the cultural ties which will bind him to

his Gaelic, industrial, familial past. His grandfather accurately summarizes his rootedness in his culture, claiming, "Once you drink underground water it becomes a part of you like the blood a man puts into a woman" (39). By the story's end, James himself realizes that he cannot easily escape the history of his family, which has "somehow endured and given me the only life I know for all these eighteen years" (49). Even if he flees Cape Breton, he is carrying all the island with him as he goes. The tragic power these deterministic forces exert over each individual is most clearly evident in the character of the father in "The Boat." Though he longed to go to university, and has spent his life exploring the "magazines and books [which] covered the bureau and competed with the clothes for domination of the chair" (110), his past work, his family ties, and his obligations as a father and husband chain him to a life for which he is personally unsuited. Unable to step beyond the role prescribed by his community, he accepts the binding power of his culture's gender and moral codes, and must endure the "iron-tipped harpoons" of scorn hurled by his wife. The best he can do is ensure that his children have the opportunity to escape their restrictive heritage, even if he is unable to slip those cords.

MacLeod traces the impact of various environmental forces, but even the temporal realm —made manifest as the weight of the past and the burden of the future — restricts the options available to the individual. Indeed, MacLeod's refusal to idealize the past further severs him from the vein of nostalgia that ran through many Maritime fictions in the early part of the twentieth century. In his overview of MacLeod's fiction, Nicholson mistakenly argues that in the first collection the temporal realm can be shaped by the individual subject: "In Alistair MacLeod's writing, our past is recuperated in a continuous present: uncertain, jeopardised even, but open still, and still possible" (Nicholson, "Turning" 93). Nicholson is correct to suggest that the past is always immediate and present to the self-conscious individual, but he underestimates the restrictive power of time. In "The Vastness of the Dark," James realizes that he has been guilty of "oversimplification... through this long and burning day, but also through most of my yet young life" (49). This realization does not free James, as much as it leads him to submit to the cultural practices that constitute his past, and thus he joins a group of miners who are driving off to pursue the very occupation that James swore to leave behind. In "The Return," the grandmother of a young boy visiting from Montreal thinks not in terms of her contemporary reality, but rather she feels bound to maintain the patterns established by the seven "genera-

tions" who precede her and remind her that "we can only stay forever if we stay right here" (79). The father of "The Boat" is able to translate his suffering into music and he becomes the expressive bard for his entire community, but as he sings the "laments and the wild and haunting Gaelic war songs" he not only evokes his own suffering, but he also feels connected to "the savage melancholy of three hundred years" (115). MacLeod's characters feel linked to the generations and eras past, but this "interfusing [of] past and present" tends to define and confine the protagonists, rather than enabling "an extension from concrete immediacy out towards timelessness" (Nicholson, "Signatures" 95).

The textual world constructed in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* is clearly hard, threatening, alienating, and meaningless, but MacLeod does not suggest that the human subject should therefore submit to these harsh forces and accept annihilation. MacLeod's early texts are ultimately driven by a strong ideological commitment to a liberal humanist vision of the independent individual. However bleak the conditions, the stories invariably describe a moment when the protagonists confront the forces that oppress them. Through their free choices and their reactions, they are able to defy their circumstances and secure a degree of personal integrity. Triumph is not an option, but the narratives do reproduce a hesitant and tentative hope. These moments celebrating the power of the individual will are brief, but they are an integral part of MacLeod's world view, and the pervasiveness of his conviction that individuals should oppose overwhelming circumstances is apparent when we examine his depiction of the characters who fail to resist the dehumanizing forces which threaten them. The villain in "In the Fall" is undoubtedly the drover, MacRae, who carries with him the "odour ... of countless frightened animals that have been carried on the back of his truck" (13). He is a reprehensible character, not because he has come to collect the family's pony in the expectation of being able to turn him into "mink-feed," but because he has so completely submitted himself to the raw and animalistic impulses of life. Driven by a crude mix of sexuality and violence, he "appreciatively" "runs his tongue over his lips " when he thinks about "horny little girls," and later "savagely" beats the pony when it resists being lead to the slaughter house (15-17). MacRae is a cardboard character who stands as a warning of what could happen to any of the family members should they align themselves with the harsh rhythms of nature. The salesman who gives James a lift to Springhill in "The Vastness of the Dark" is a similarly corrupt figure. A racist and a sexual predator, the "very heavy man" who drives "the heavy red car" embodies the bestial nature of man as he seduces a lonely

widow and eagerly "pump[s] away" even as she mournfully calls out for her "dead husband" (46). Completely divorced from the legacy of self-sacrifice, integrity, and honesty, which had been forged in times of disaster and remains as Nova Scotia's real heritage, the salesman's selfishness and sense of disconnection shocks James and makes him feel as if "this man has left footprints on a soul I did not even know that I possessed" (50).[5]

Not all the characters who fail to resist the deterministic forces that surround them are depicted as villains. Sometimes their lack of self-consciousness is simply represented as an example of existential "bad faith," as they become figures who limit or hamper the interests or free-doms of the protagonists.[6] The mother in "The Boat" has accepted the dictates of her culture as absolutes, and since she "was of the sea as were all her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned" she is vehemently opposed to any experience which would take her, or her family, beyond the limits of her fishing village. "Almost dehumanized by loyalty to a place which seems reduced to primal elements," she sacrifices her emotional bond to her husband and her children, in her determination to remain committed to her heritage (Keefer 182). Such figures recur throughout MacLeod's early fiction and they become manifestations, albeit in reverse, of the writer's moral code and ideological perspective. MacLeod opposes any attempt by individuals to escape the hard choices presented to the self-aware individual by submitting to any of the various forces which sweep the textual world.

The essence of what it means to be a human being is, in MacLeod's texts, the ability of the individual to articulate and secure a sense of the self even as he or she recognizes the powerful forces that press from without and within. Identity is not just a matter of reinscribing the self into an enduring narrative, of turning a "live history" into a "narrative history" (Nicholson, "Turning" 85). The character must act, or at least attempt action, in order to establish a self. *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* echoes the liberal humanist vision of the individual, but it is a vision shadowed by his acceptance that in a modernist condition, only a gesture toward the ideal of freedom may be possible. When the protagonists make these gestures toward freedom, the value of the moment is evident in MacLeod's insistence that it constitutes an instance of grace. Although he is not developing or advocating a particular theological framework, he views such moments of choice with a kind of awe: an awe felt in part because they are moments of possibility, and in part because they often arise only through the great sacrifice of another individual.

There would seem to be little to celebrate in "In the Fall." As the beloved pony goes to its death, the youngest son, David, expresses his outrage at his parent's betrayal by slaughtering his mother's prized chickens. When the child swings "his axe in all directions" and calls his father a "Cocksucker... in some kind of small, sad parody of MacRae," it would seem as if he has "plunge[d] into the nihilistic moment" (Berces 121). But far from descending into the abyss, David uses his violence to reaffirm his moral absolutes and kills the animals as an act of retribution against the parents who have fallen short of his expectations. His slaughter of the helpless birds is grisly, but the story would be darker still if he simply accepted the betrayal of his favourite pet and went about his daily chores.

If David's assertion of his own values in the face of his harsh environment reflects the passions of his youth, the reactions of his parents are more affirming in their subtlety. In the closing image of the story, the father "puts his arms around my mother's waist" and she removes the combs from her hair so that "it surrounds and engulfs my father's head" (23). The evils of the world cannot be defeated, but the sufferers can be fully cognizant of their traumas and still find comfort and strength in each other's presence. The father finds a sense of forgiveness and release in his wife's arms, and she, who cannot afford to be compassionate to the animal, can soften her hard exterior to enfold and accept her husband's sorrow. The older son recognizes that in a deterministic world uncertainty and compromise are inevitable, but if the losses are authentically recognized a deeper humanity can be retained and even strengthened. "In the Fall" does not chronicle the conquests of chaos, but rather records the slim victory of individual integrity.

James experiences a similarly fragile affirmation in the concluding scene of "The Vastness of the Dark." The youth flees from the despicable character of the travelling salesman, recognizing his own debt and obligation to his family and community. In that recognition he makes an uneasy peace with his fate. As he leaves Springhill, he is picked up by a group of miners who are going out west to find work in Blind River. MacLeod brilliantly captures the paradox that James is free only to accept his determined condition, by describing how the youth climbs into the back seat, sees the other "two sacks of miners gear on the floor," and puts his sack "there too because there isn't any other place" (50).[7] He tacitly agrees with his fellow miners that life "seems to bust your balls and ... break your heart," but at least he has the freedom to identify with this heritage, painful as it may be. In these early stories there are no easy resolutions, "no place ... for the redeemer figures that helped the travellers of old across the obstacles on the way" (Vauthier 163).

The best example of MacLeod's determination to maintain at least a tentative sense of individual integrity and freedom in the face of a deterministic world appears in "The Boat." The narrator finds that he must choose to betray either his demanding mother or his sacrificial father. He is trapped between his sense of obligation to his mother, who feels her son will be "untrue" to his family if he leaves his village to pursue his education, and his sense of duty to his father who has given him the chance to leave by allowing himself to be washed overboard during a storm and lost at sea.[8] He is "a traitor whether he goes or stays" (Keefer 234). Given his impossible situation, it is not surprising that the narrator cannot find happiness. Though he does take up the opportunity afforded by his father's untimely death and becomes a teacher at a "great Midwestern university" (106), he is haunted by his choice, and often wakes in the middle of the night so "afraid to be alone with death" that he seeks solace in the nearest "all-night restaurant" (105). In a grim world, no path can take the individual toward happiness, and since joy is not an option in MacLeod's fiction, it is vital that the protagonist have a hand in choosing his or her own misery.[9] Keefer argues that the stories in MacLeod's first volume reproduce a tragic paradigm, but he does not fulfil the full tragic form; his protagonists are not destroyed by the cruel choices they are forced to make. Indeed, the very opportunity to make a choice allows them to fortify their sense of identity and survive in their otherwise tragic situation.

The emphasis on the fate of the individual, and the recognition in all the stories that only tentative bonds link the protagonist to the larger community, breeds a kind of egalitarian vision in the early stories. Unlike the later stories in *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun,* in which MacLeod's more conservative perspective tends to reinforce the confining gender roles of the patriarchal perspective, the more liberal vision of the early stories tends to question some established social conventions. Because protagonists define themselves against the external forces of the world, less emphasis is placed on the male subject's tendency to define himself against an objectified version of the feminine. Certainly, the exclusive use of male narrators, and the fact that "sensitive males outnumber the pragmatic females — within the family context — by three to one," confirms the reader's sense that the narratives reproduce a masculinist perspective (Ditsky 3). Moreover, there is little question that MacLeod is representing a social structure that is anchored firmly on patriarchal traditions and assumptions. But MacLeod does not always treat the primacy of the male, and the family's dependence on the man's economic power, as either natural or good. More often, the stories clearly demonstrate that indi-

vidual happiness and family stability are threatened by the patriarchal traditions that value only male work, for when the worker is injured or killed — as they inevitably are in MacLeod's fiction — the rest of the family descends into terrible poverty. MacLeod treats with great sympathy the mother in "In the Fall," who must curtail her own sympathetic responses in order to deal with her limited financial resources. And he presents as tragic figures the lonely women of Springhill, who are so traumatized by the deaths of their husbands in the mines that they are willing to sleep with such men as the travelling salesman.

Thus, even in stories written through the male gaze, the struggle of the individual is still central enough that several female characters emerge as complex figures and undertake the existential struggle to define themselves. In "The Vastness of the Dark," James's grandmother is an independent figure who understands the economic context of her homeland and writes letters to her son begging him to ignore his father's pleas that he return home to work the local mines. Like the father in "The Boat," she attempts to open opportunities for her children, though they may not have the strength to take advantage of them. "The Road to Rankin's Point" is a particularly good example of this egalitarian ideology as the grandmother struggles against time, old age, and the oppressive good intentions of her own children, in order to maintain her independence. Driven by the stoic realization that "no one said that life is to be easy. Only that it is to be lived," she is still determined to stay on her own land. The moment her ability to continue resisting the whims of fate is compromised, and it seems that she may have to move to a senior's home, she willingly dies. She thus is a complex figure who is as constrained and doomed as any of the male characters in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.* Such independent figures must be balanced against the many stereotyped shrews and Madonnas/mothers who populate MacLeod's stories, but if the early fiction is predominantly masculinist in tone, it is not exclusively patriarchal in its construction.

MacLeod's second collection of short stories, *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, marks a significant departure from his earlier work. A change in tone was first recognized in an early review of the volume. Michael Dixon notes that "despite the constant pressures of emotional and physical violence," the protagonists experience a "sense of profound serenity and faithfulness" as they reclaim a "collective past" and a "collective memory." Keefer agrees that while the stories are anchored in the same environment, the characters are "freed of any fierce sense of closure" (236). The sense of ease which both critics perceive is the first evidence that MacLeod has completed an

epistemological shift toward certainty. There are, of course, numerous ways in which a writer can construct a solid philosophical ground on which to stand, but as MacLeod turns increasingly to the image of the community with its stable traditional and patriarchal systems, we can recognize that this emerging sense of certainty and security is also bound up with a political shift toward a more conservative perspective.[10]

Many aspects of the world represented in *As Birds Bring For the Sun* are just as harsh as those found in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.* In such stories as "The Winter Dog" and "As Birds Bring Forth The Sun" the environment remains dangerous and threatening. Indeed, in these texts the forces of nature seem almost to be plotting actively to betray the human characters; the ice fields tempt the young boy to explore the shifting flows, and the wild dogs are driven by "blood-lust or duty or perhaps starvation" to kill the vulnerable and kind man who lands on their shores (121). Economic and cultural constraints remain strong as well. In "To Everything There is a Season" the family depends on the money earned by the eldest son who works the "long flat carriers of grain and iron ore" that sail on the Great Lakes, and in "The Closing Down of Summer," MacKinnon's elite team of miners must ply their trade in Africa, far from the exhausted mines of Cape Breton. Perhaps these oppressive forces are not as merciless and overwhelming as in the early prose, but they still threaten rather than support the individual.

A more substantial shift becomes apparent when we note that MacLeod's *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* is less concerned with the individual's existential quest for a sense of self and is almost disinterested in the liberal concepts of freedom and independence. The later stories rarely attend to the individual choices of the protagonists. The characters in "Winter Dog," "To Every Thing There is a Season," "Second Spring," and "Vision" are all essentially passive figures who are simply waiting for events within their world or their clan to unfold, or they are recalling events in which other far-removed actants played a role. The protagonists of the later stories discover and secure their identities only by fusing themselves with a larger community. This move toward a conservative ideology in which the individual must be linked to a larger social body — which is itself maintained through its commitment to traditional hierarchies and modes of expression — is evident in each of the narratives. For example, in "The Closing Down of Summer," the miners recognize that their sense of identity is forged and strengthened by their work as a collective unit and their joint retreat into their Gaelic heritage. The miners, who function as an interdependent working collective as they travel to mines all over the

globe, have "gone back to Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar" (19). The unifying power of the cultural experience cannot be restored by the artificial "Celtic Revivals" which are "fostered largely by government grants." Instead, the essence of the culture must sink in "unconsciously through some strange osmotic process while ... growing up" (19). The essence of identity can thus be established and interpreted only within the traditional community. The suggestion that identity is tribal in character is confirmed when MacKinnon observes the Zulus, who "dance until they shook the earth," and recognizes that like those tribal dancers, he and his group cannot be understood fully by outsiders. The men are alienated from their wives and children, but the alienation breeds only a sense of regret and does not emerge as an existential anxiety. Their identities are secured by their heritage.

The conservatism of the later texts is also evident in the way MacLeod changes his representation of time, for the temporal world of the later stories is considerably less imposing than in the earlier texts. The characters are still embedded in their cultural heritage and their specific local past, and their lives are still influenced by the hand of fate, but that past is less restrictive: death remains omnipresent, but it is not sealed. Throughout *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, mysticism plays a role as superstitions, second sight, and dreams allow the protagonists to connect with the past and converse with forces beyond the grave. Life and death are not represented as binary opposites, but rather as a continuum along which particular individuals can move freely. Protagonists who are able to connect mystically with the past are able to resist and even reshape the present, and so individual identity is no longer anchored exclusively on ambiguous gestures of freedom, but on the movable ground of a community's inherited cultural memory.

In "The Tuning of Perfection," the central figure has been alone for most of his adult life. Having lost his wife, his baby son, and his brother, before the age of twenty-seven, Archibald is such an isolated individual that even his conversation is gradually reduced to a series of murmurs and brief phrases. Yet, although he feels vulnerable and isolated from his surviving daughters and the wider community, he will not compromise his integrity as a folk singer and modify his music to meet the demands of a television producer, even though he alienates his entire clan by his stubborn behaviour. Archibald anchors his identity in the past, and his dream of his long dead wife — a dream which affords him access to a past community that only exists as a part of his memory — reinforces his commitment to his personal artistic vision.

The collection's final text, "Vision," has an even stronger vein of mysticism. Indeed, the hand of fate seems to rule the lives of some of the characters, and thus this later story seems to distance itself, slightly, from the realist genre's emphasis on cause and effect, in favour of the romance tradition with its emphasis on predetermined patterns. The story's complex narrative records a family history stretching five generations, as the narrator recalls his own father's retelling of a fateful encounter with his maternal grandparents. The family is haunted, almost literally, by a scandal, which originated in the grandfather's decision to marry a woman while fathering twin daughters with his sister-in-law. The sister-in-law is not only betrayed, but she is also eventually blinded and, finally, she dies in an accidental fire; her spirit haunts the family ever after. The grandfather eventually goes blind, the narrator's father is blinded in the second world war, and numerous members of the family have seen visions of the wronged sister at critical moments of their lives. The family suffers from its cursed past and its shameful legacy of "uncertain" parentage, for each generation is inevitably disfigured. But if the individuals are physically wounded, the apparition of the woman also has a positive function, in that she sometimes makes appearances to warn her descendants of danger. Just before the narrator's father landed on the beaches of Normandy, he felt the spirit of the woman force him to pause, and thus, unlike the rest of his company, he was not killed by a falling shell. In a sense, then, the story suggests that some physical abilities may be compromised, but the mystical forces at work more than compensate for these physical losses by endowing the family with a greater kind of prophetic, visionary power. The narrator feels that he is a "child of uncertainty," but when compared to the protagonists of the earlier stories, he has a strong sense of an inherited identity. He may not be able to "see and understand the twisted strand of love" that binds his family, but he does not doubt the existence of the bond (167).

Since individuals anchor themselves in their traditional community — either the immediate community that surrounds them or the community which is accessible to them across time — there is less interest in the individual's — particularly the individual woman's — search for a stable identity. As in the earlier stories, the narratives are related by or focussed on male figures, but in *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun* there is not a single female character who rises to prominence in the text. The conservative ideology evident elsewhere in the fiction is also apparent in the more traditional and patriarchal representations of the feminine in the later

texts. There are a few attending mothers, and the occasional wife speaking from the wings, but no woman emerges, like the grandmother of "The Road to Rankin's Point," to find her place within the communal tradition.[11] If the collection is masculinist in tone, it is also more deeply patriarchal in its construction of gender roles. As each of the various male characters attempts to secure his identity by anchoring himself in his culture, he often does so by connecting with or contrasting himself against a woman who embodies, and sometimes entombs, the essence of the community's culture. The feminine is thus presented as passive space; a functional and necessary supplement to the masculine drive towards certainty. Nor is this constructed role of woman as cultural signifier ironized within the text. In "The Closing Down of Summer" MacKinnon is secure in his identity as father and husband, for he is fulfilling the traditional miner's role of supporting his family although he is never in their presence. He claims that he is not "critical of" his wife, who has been absorbed into the domestic sphere, and the narrative presents as natural the fact that she "seems to have gone permanently into a world of avocado appliances and household cleanliness and vicarious experiences provided by the interminable soap operas that fill her television afternoons" (18). "She too is from a mining family," and is thus represented as comfortable with her empty life (18). So long as she supplements his role by 'manning the home-front' the narrative is not interested in exploring her role or examining MacKinnon's lack of interest in his mate's life.

In the story "Vision," the unnamed woman, who is betrayed, is represented with considerable sympathy, but she is less an individual than a mythic figure who appears only in a series of recollections and occasional visions. She is always described by a third party, and the text finds no opportunity to focalize the narrative through her perspective. She is the anchor for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who identify themselves as the "sons of uncertainty," but little attention is paid to the identity of the woman herself. She is less a character in the story than a function in the mythology of the family, and when she appears in visions to proclaim "it is myself," we cannot but sense that this "self" is an abstract rather than a particular individual construct (161).

"The Tuning of Perfection" provides the clearest example of this tendency to depict the feminine as the essence of the local culture. Throughout the story Archibald is anxious about his role, for the values and practices of his folk world seem irrelevant in the new industrial and mass-media society. When he sells his remaining horse, he is appalled to discover that the animals he used for work in the woods are being bought by a phar-

maceutical supplier who will use the pregnant mare's urine to make birth control pills. But despite his general desire to preserve his old-fashioned ways, he cannot find the courage to defy his family and refuse the chance to perform his music on television, until his wife appears before him in a dream and sings "with a clarity and a beauty that caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck even as the tears welled to his eye" (113). In this context, the vision of the dead wife functions as a touchstone of authenticity and integrity, but she too is more of an icon than an individual. Indeed, her status as a static representation of an idealized past and an mystical emblem of cultural stability is necessary if she is to perform her role as a supplement who enables Archibald to secure and stabilize his identity. The identity of the feminine is, in this case, effaced, in order to shore up the identity of the masculine character at the centre of the text. Not only does the dead woman play out her role as a supplement to her husband from beyond the grave, but as the benchmark of feminine perfection she contrasts nicely with the modern women who have accommodated the demands of the twentieth century and become myopic in their vulgarity and materialism. Archibald's granddaughter drives a pick-up, which testifies to her crass character with its bumper sticker, "If you're horny, honk your horn." Not surprisingly, she cannot fully understand Archibald's desire to maintain the integrity of his culture and his soul. MacLeod's early fiction is largely free of the sentimental impulse which characterizes much of the fiction written in the first half of the twentieth century. However, in his more recent fiction the shift towards a more conservative and patriarchal ideology has been accompanied by an increasing sense of nostalgia in the fiction. For Archibald, at least, his only moments of ease are available through his memory of an idealized past.

Not all of MacLeod's fiction dwells on the weighty issues of cultural survival, though even in the collection's few humorous pieces similar ideological patterns assert themselves through the construction of patriarchal gender roles. "The Second Spring" follows a young teen, an aspiring member of the calf club, as he attempts to improve his family's dairy stock by breeding one of their cows with a pedigree bull several miles away. The story examines humanity's attempts to manage the forces of nature, and in the first eight pages of the twenty-six page story MacLeod documents the controlled breeding practices and slaughtering procedures in such detail that it seems as though the rhythms of nature can be tamed. The lighter tone of the story emerges when the boy takes his prized cow, Morag, on a five mile journey to be covered by a thoroughbred Ayrshire bull, only to be ambushed half way by a local, hybrid, rogue bull who

pushes through all man-made boundaries in his determination to follow his mating impulses. When confronted with this raw animalistic force, the naive youth recognizes and then recoils in "astonishment at the uncontrollable power of Nature" (Ditsky 7). But if the main theme examines the futility of humanity's attempts to control nature, the humour of the story is also anchored in the boy's confused and sometimes ludicrous attempts to negotiate his own gender identity. As the male in charge of Morag's reproduction, he experiments with a number of roles and identifies himself as a "concerned father," and as "one of those 'guides' in the Gothic novels" who "guard [the] tremulous female figure from the lascivious, slobbering male" (76). Later, he awaits calving season as if he "were the young expectant father" (82). But the boy has misread his role and fails to recognize the real power of the masculine in the natural world. When the rogue bull approaches the protected female, the youth discovers his own helplessness as he is literally flung around by the forces of sexual desire. Instead of protecting the feminine, he sobs, becomes a stereotype of the feminine, and must be rescued by his older cousin, "a tremendously big man" who lives a "reckless life" and is thus able to confront and defeat the sexual force of the bull with a well aimed blow to the head. The boy is traumatized not just by his encounter with natural forces, but by the more specific realization that he is not able to fulfil his role as a protector and controller of the feminine. MacLeod is not suggesting that the sharp divisions between the masculine and the feminine should be modified or renegotiated. Instead, he relies on the audience's recognition and acceptance of these norms. The reader is supposed to understand that while the youth may someday be able take his appropriate place in the world, he must wait out his adolescence and seek temporary solace in baseball: a sport which grants him the ironic illusion that in his "small area of the earth it seemed that everything was under ... control" (84). The patriarchal assumptions that govern the fictional community have been inscribed into the ideological and structural centre of the story, and into the centre of the collection itself.

Alistair MacLeod has been celebrated as "one of the finest practitioners of the short story" and as a teller of "brilliant" tales which break from the sentimental visions of the poor and broken in the Maritimes. Doubtless he deserves such praise, for the meticulous precision and elegance of his style has allowed him to create short fictions which, in the tradition of Maritime literature, are unparalleled in their complexity. But MacLeod's most important contribution has been his ability to remain flexible, for he has not simply retold the same tale in story after story;

rather his collections reveal that his art and his ideological positions have varied over time. He has developed, as Elroy Dermert suggests, a "conscious dialectic between the idyllic notions of the traditional and the social and economic realism of contemporary Cape Breton ... A dialectic ... [which] is ... aimed at a starker understanding of the alienation and sense of loss, which are part of the island's social realities" (171). But even this dialectic has varied and shifted over the last thirty years as MacLeod has moved from a sense of skepticism mixed with liberalism in his early explorations of the individual to a more focussed and conservative exploration of the role society and memory play in the life and consciousness of the individual. The reasons for MacLeod's ideological shift could be diverse. After a period of skepticism and uncertainty, MacLeod may have become more personally committed to the notion that communal and traditional hierarchies help to steady and stabilize the individual. Or, as has been the case with another Maritime writer, David Adams Richards, a prolonged exploration of the grimmer aspects of Maritime experience within a realist framework may have propelled him toward more salutary, less naturalistic forms through which he can produce a more confident representation of the region. Nor should we ignore the possibility that MacLeod may be responding to his own decision to develop his professional career outside the region, with a corresponding recognition of the importance of memory, history, and community within his later narratives. Whatever the reasons, MacLeod himself could comfortably adopt the words of the father in "To Every Thing There is a Season," as he quietly affirms that, "Every man moves on ... but there is no need to grieve. He leaves good things behind" (57).

## NOTES

[1] Budge Wilson's *The Leaving* won the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Canadian Book Award in 1990, and Leo McKay's *Like This: Stories* was nominated for the Giller Prize in 1995.

[2] "The Boat" first appeared in 1969, "The Vastness of the Dark" was published in 1971, and "In the Fall" was first published in 1973. "Second Spring" and "The Tuning of Perfection" were first published in 1980 and 1984 respectively and "Vision" first appeared when *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* was published in1986. After publishing *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun*, MacLeod worked steadily on a novel and produced virtually no short fiction, with the exception of a story called "Island," published by Thistledown Press in 1989. The novel, entitled *No Great Mischief*, was published in the fall of 1999. Although this paper will not examine the novel, it is worth noting that in his latest text MacLeod continues to explore the themes and positions he set forth in *As Birds Bring Forth The Sun*. For the characters in

*No Great Mischief*, a sense of personal identity can be attained only as the individuals connect themselves to the historically anchored, collectively constituted community. Alexander MacDonald, the narrator of the novel, is literally and figuratively orphaned in the modern world, and he reaches a full understanding of himself only as he follows and attends to his older brother Calum MacDonald, the clan leader of his generation who faithfully obeys the dictates of his culture, even if he must resist the assumptions of the contemporary world.

[3] MacLeod's commitment to the realist aesthetic is evident, most immediately, in his elegant and precise style. Characterized by its lack of linguistic self-reflexivity, a realist text keeps the role of language and questions about its own fictionality in the background, and once the style has been established it rarely calls attention to itself. Though critics have occasionally suggested that MacLeod's highly "literary" style moves his short fiction towards a postmodern aesthetic, there is little support for such an argument: MacLeod carefully effaces any of the inter- or intra-textual allusions which might suggest that the stories are self-conscious ventures into the realms of textual play. Even the extraordinarily elegant and precise style of the narration is justified within a realist framework, for the narrators are often highly educated. The sophisticated style of the stories is never examined in the self-reflexive fashion that characterizes the metafictional texts being produced by other writers in the late 1960s and 1970s. For a more complete analysis of critics' attempts to view MacLeod as a postmodern writer see Hiscock's forthcoming article, "'The Inherited Life': Alistair MacLeod and the Ends of History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35. 2 (2000).

[4] Liberalism has been defined in numerous ways, but the term generally denotes an ideology which asserts that an individual has the "liberty" to determine his/her own physical, emotional, and spiritual state, within the secure confines of a social system (Horowitz 143-47). In *Technology and Empire*, George Grant expands on this definition asserting that "liberalism [is] a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumptions that man's essence is his freedom and therefore what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it" (114). MacLeod is less interested the individual's desire to reshape the world, and more attentive to the ways in which the world threatens to reshape the individual.

[5] Characters from urban centers are often depicted as selfish and self-centered. This pattern is played out by such negative actants as the traveling salesman, the overly protective and snobbish mother in "The Return," and the selfish children who are at the airport to greet their father at the end of "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood." But the rural world is just as capable of producing self-centered characters, and the reader must avoid concluding too quickly that MacLeod, as a Maritimer, is reproducing a hinterland's bias against the urban centre.

[6] Francis Berces argues that although there no "special basis at present for invoking Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel, or others as specific sources" for MacLeod's existentialism, his "repeated concern with several aspects of the human condition, in particular with choice, freedom, becoming, alienation, exile, other people, and death" allows us to readily associate his work with this philosophical movement (114-15).

[7] A note of thanks to Shyanne Austin and the students in "English 3503: Canadian Short Fiction," for their careful explication of this passage.

[8] Readers are sometimes uncertain about the father's motivations at the moment of his death, for the narrator reveals only that he turned to look at his father "and he was not there and I knew even in that instant that he would never be again" (123). Suicide is the most likely option. Earlier in the story, the narrator carefully recounts how he vowed that he would fish with his father "as long as he lived," and his father only "smiled" and cryptically replied "I hope you will remember what you've said" (122). The passage is carefully planted by MacLeod and the "resonant admonition" would make little sense, unless we admit that the father is planning his own death in order to allow (or even force) his son to abandon the boat and seek a new life (Stevens 270). Indeed, it would be difficult to explain the narrator's tor-

turous nightmares unless we conclude that he, at least, is convinced that his father's death was not accidental.

[9] Berces suggests that the texts strongly echo Camus and argues in a similar vein that the "very harshness and simplicity of their living conditions... all provide... 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" (115-16).

[10] Conservatives emphasize the importance of social order and stress collectivist models whether they be located in the family unit, the local village, or the nation as a whole (Cantor 279). The secure identity of the individual is important, but individuality itself is not of supreme value within a system which emphasizes the transhistorical, universal "character of humanity." Ultimately, people must come together to form a hierarchical, patriarchal, cooperative unit for the society to function, and even if communities decay and need to be renewed, reformed, or even restructured, the guiding model is always communal (Horowitz 144).

[11] This discussion is focusing on the ideologies which drive the two collections of short fiction, but it should be remembered that MacLeod's story "Island," published by Thistledown Press in 1989, is written from the female perspective. The central protagonist of that text, Agnes MacPhedran, certainly evolves into a self-conscious and distinct personality as she operates in a patriarchal world. More recently, in MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischief* the narrator's paternal grandmother and his twin sister both emerge as rounded characters in a novel which is otherwise exclusively interested in exploring the complexities and tragedies of the masculine world.

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