

"SOUNDS IN THE EMPTY SPACES OF HISTORY": THE HIGHLAND CLEARANCES IN NEIL GUNN'S *HIGHLAND RIVER* AND ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S "THE ROAD TO RANKIN'S POINT"

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The recent work of both Canadian and Scottish literary critics suggests that the writers in both of these countries wrestle with what Scottish novelist Neil Gunn's *Highland River* refers to as "sounds in the empty spaces of history": the various and barely audible vibrations of narrative that are suppressed by the monolithic din of official historiography (62). The exclusive nature of received history thwarts the quest for individual and cultural identity in both Canada and Scotland. As W. H. New writes in his 1989 *A History of Canadian Literature*, "for several prominent writers" of the Sixties, Seventies, and early Eighties "the historicity of heritage was a motif that shaped still larger canvases, in which the autonomy of historical events and the subjectivity of the individual record of history are related but separate measures of the reality of experience" (242). The thematizing of what New refers to as the "historicity of heritage" is manifest in the Scottish-Canadian genealogical explorations which characterize such Canadian works as Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Alistair MacLeod's short story "The Road to Rankin's Point." In Scotland, a country where the cultural past has been obscured by the exclusive historiography of English imperialism,¹ Cairns Craig writes:

[W]hat Scottish novelists have had to do again and again in recent times is to link their novel to some moment of historical dynamism which intrudes upon the historyless Scottish community: Scotland can only be known through narrative in these moments when narrative possibilities are forced

upon a society that has lost all sense of its own narrative.
 ("The Body in the Kit Bag: History and the Scottish Novel"
 19)

One of the moments Craig refers to in this essay is the Highland Clearances, a dynamic and intersecting moment for both Scottish and Canadian literatures. *The Diviners*, "The Road to Rankin's Point," *Highland River*, and Scottish novelist and poet Iain Chrichton Smith's *Consider the Lilies* all draw on the upheaval and dislocation created by the Clearances. Laurence's Morag Gunn attempts to locate herself in the present by excavating her ancestral past in a work in progress which eventually evolves into *The Diviners*. Morag's excavations sketch out her lineal relationship to the dispossessed Gael Piper Gunn, who led his band of evicted Sutherland Highlanders from Scotland to Canada where they displaced the Métis. Laurence's linking of Morag's personal experience to moments in history such as the Clearances and the Riel rebellions makes audible hitherto inaudible utterances from the past. For example, Morag's relationships with Métis Jules Tonnerre and ancestral Scot Christie Logan expose her to alternative reconstructions of the clash between Louis Riel and the Canadian militia at Batoche, subversive histories she gives voice to in her narrative (Laurence 144, 159-160).

For Iain Chrichton Smith the Clearances mark the dispersal and fracturing of Highland families, and a dissolution of Gaelic culture in Scotland. Chrichton Smith's 1968 novel *Consider the Lilies* personalizes this history of estrangement and cultural erasure in the story of Mrs. Scott, an elderly woman of the Highlands who faces eviction from her ancestral home, and loses her son through emigration to Canada where he seeks a more substantial life than a future in a dissolving Highland community can offer him. The scene of the son's departure suggests the ongoing cross-cultural dialogue between Canada and Scotland. Mrs. Scott and the other women of the community find themselves singing a Gaelic psalm to their departing loved ones. Blinded by tears, her voice cracking with emotion, Mrs. Scott stops singing, at which point she hears "the answering voices" of those bound for Canada "floating across the water, the two groups—those on the ship and those on shore—united across water by the psalm" (Chrichton Smith 115). Unfortunately, the morass of history and

the vast expanses of ocean and time will distort these sounds, cutting off those who remain in Scotland from those forced to leave, thereby creating an absent presence on both sides of the Atlantic. The narrators in these works by Chrichton Smith, Laurence, Gunn, and MacLeod return to these moments of disjunction to recover parts of themselves and their cultures through a reconstruction of the lost peoples in their ancestral pasts from the remnants of oral narrative, music, and the ruins which mark the landscape.

The genealogical explorations of *Highland River* and "The Road to Rankin's Point" are especially evocative of the genealogies Canadian critic and author Robert Kroetsch describes as "the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even." Kroetsch writes that as the victims of such a history "we wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions" (65). It is such a confrontation that is sought by Calum, the narrator of MacLeod's short story, and Kenn, the voice of Gunn's novel. Both Calum, a Canadian descendent of displaced Scottish crofters, and Kenn, a native Scot, struggle to decode the barely audible notes emanating from the vacuum created by received notions of history. Metaphorically, Gunn's and MacLeod's narrators can be read as straining to hear each other in their efforts to unearth a shared ancestral past, the utterances of which are manifest in the telling of these textually separate, yet culturally related narratives of Gaelic displacement and cultural erasure.

Neil Gunn (1891-1973) was one of the leading writers, along with Hugh MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir, and Naomi Mitchison, who came to prominence during the Scottish Renaissance, a period of renewed interest in Scottish literature in the 1920s and 1930s. Although not a Gaelic speaker himself, Gunn's awareness of the Gaelic and Pictish past of his native Caithness, and his interest in a collective unconscious of Scotland's cultural past and its relation to the present is reflected in most of the twenty novels he wrote between 1926 and 1954. Moments of rupture in Scotland's past are the materials which shape much of Gunn's work. The Viking invasions of Scotland and their tumultuous impact on Pictish-Celtic culture provide the narrative focus for *Sun Circle* (1933). *Butcher's Broom* (1934) relates the forced eviction of an entire Gaelic community from their ancestral lands during the

Highland Clearances, and the Clearances figure prominently in *Highland River*. A large number of Gunn's novels, like so many of MacLeod's short stories, are set in isolated fishing communities where the sea is both a nurturing and a threatening force. *Highland River*, regarded by many critics as Gunn's finest novel and the winner of Scotland's James Tait Black Memorial Prize for 1937, shares with MacLeod's work not only the evocation of the psychic scars of the Clearances, but also a motif of exile and return in Kenn's migration from his native Highlands for university and employment in the south, and his adult return to the Highland river of his childhood.

Whether they are itinerant miners, students bound for university, or those in pursuit of economic stability, many of the characters who inhabit MacLeod's two published volumes of haunting and lyrical short stories *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) and *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* (1986) are borne away from their Cape Breton homes along what Calum refers to as "a big, fast, brutal road that leads into the world," returning home with the doubled perception of outsider and native to the Gaelic culture that informs MacLeod's work. "The Closing Down of Summer" from MacLeod's second volume of short stories is a roving miner's first-person meditation on the fragile destiny of the Gaelic community in Cape Breton and the traditional vocation of mining. On the day of his departure from Nova Scotia for the depths of South Africa he unfolds a history of tragic deaths and contemplates the reduction of Gaelic culture, as it is manifest in song, to "everything that song should not be, contrived and artificial and non-spontaneous and lacking in communication" (24). In "The Tuning of Perfection," from the same collection, the violence of the Highland Clearances that brought the grandfather of the story's protagonist, Archibald, to Canada provides a larger context for the contemporary, economically-motivated migration of Gaelic speakers from Nova Scotia, an exodus that leaves Archibald as "'the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers'" (108). MacLeod's writing, in ways similar to Gunn's highly historicized narratives but in the context of Canada's Gaelic diaspora, textualizes the breakdown of Gaelic culture and simultaneously, in the inscription of this breakdown in narratives that draw on the Gaelic folkways of Cape Breton and the history of the Clearances, moves toward a preservation of this culture.

The dying Calum's journey along the road to Rankin's Point to visit his grandmother becomes a metaphysical quest for life and self through knowledge of his ancestral past, a journey that echoes Kenn's transcendent odyssey up the Highland River. Kenn's journey to the source of the river "became in the end a thrilling exploration into the source of the river and the source of himself" (*Highland River* 61). A large part of this exploration is comprised of a delving into the "lost times" of Kenn's ancestral past to locate himself through his estranged people: the Picts, Vikings, Celts, Druids, and the dispossessed crofters of the Clearances such as Alistair MacLeod's MacCrimmons of Rankin's Point (*Highland River* 35, 62). As a young boy Kenn discovers that the history and geography taught by the schoolmaster are devoid of the "joy" he feels when tracking salmon up the Highland River. "The history," Kenn complains, "was concerned with English kings and queens and the dates of battles" while the geography study of English industrial towns was "an even worse ordeal" (28). Joy is absent from these lessons because they are not relevant to Kenn or his classmates; these lessons displace the vitality of Scottish history and geography that Kenn taps into through the novel's allegorical "'salmon of knowledge'" (212).

As the omniscient voice of the mature Kenn comments, however, this "'salmon of knowledge'" is not simply an abstraction; "it has real silver scales and a desirable shape" and is Kenn's link to the spiritual and physical ecosystem of the glen (212). The first encounter with the salmon provides Kenn with the visceral experience that makes him aware of his innate sense of ancestral past and self:

[O]ut of that noiseless world in the grey of the morning, all his ancestors came at him. They tapped his breast until the bird inside it fluttered madly; they drew a hand along his hair until his scalp crinkled; they made the blood within him tingle to a dance that had him leaping from boulder to boulder before he rightly knew to what desperate venture he was committed. (8)

This moment stimulates Kenn's "perfect hunger" for more knowledge of the physical Highland River and the spiritual river of self, and to know self he must investigate the many layers of ancestry of which it is composed (76). Only after his encounter

with the salmon does Kenn become aware of his innate sense of ancestral history:

Kenn in his boyhood had certainly no glimmering of an idea of how [Gael, Viking, or Pict] had filled his own glen with peaceful and violent history, with cunning tunes for the chanter, with odd laughable twists of thought, with courage for the sea. And yet in some unaccountable way he seemed to be aware of the living essence of this history without having been explicitly taught it. (62-63)

He soon discovers "how the races that had gone to his making had each left its signature on the river bank," inscriptions of place names in Gaelic and Norse that he collects to reconstruct his past (61). The concept of history as an absent presence is impressed upon Kenn by the departure of his brother for Canada. From this experience Kenn learns that the processes of migration and estrangement are as much a part of his present as they are his past.

In contrast to the youthful Kenn's initiation into what will be a life-long genealogical enquiry, Alistair MacLeod's twenty-six-year-old leukaemia-afflicted narrator has but a few months to live when he embarks on his voyage into family history. Calum travels the road to Rankin's Point seeking to "realize and understand . . . [his] grandmother's perception of death in all of its diversity," in the knowledge of his past that he seeks through his unseen and unknown grandfather (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 140). MacLeod's road to Rankin's Point leads, paradoxically, to both life and death. Calum, a dying man, travels down the road on which his grandfather bled to death (and upon which his grandmother will eventually die), toward a dying woman who lives on a desolate and deteriorating farm, to retrieve a knowledge of what appears to be a dead past. Calum says of the road: "[I]t winds its tortuous clinging way for some eight miles before it ends quite abruptly and permanently in my grandmother's yard." Rankin's Point itself is described as "an end in every way" (128). Calum, however, declares death is not what he will find at the end of this road but "only the intensity of life." He hopes to find vitality in the cultural history of his grandfather's family, the MacCrimmons, a history which the nar-

rator hopes might, like the hot tea he drinks "burn [him] more fiercely into life" (138).

Unfortunately, Calum cannot effectively translate the invigorating music of his cultural past into his narrative present where Highland culture, although living in the Gaelic songs played by his family, is, simultaneously, dying. Economic necessity and career aspirations have displaced many of the family members who return to their grandmother's dilapidated farm from "their scattered destinations on the roads of the larger world" (145). As Calum observes, three of his cousins fail to return to sing the ancient songs of the MacCrimmons; alternatively they "gyrate and play the music of their time, the early 1970s" in Las Vegas and Toronto (139). Calum himself has only recently returned from the larger world to die in Cape Breton. Furthermore, the Gaelic language is no longer understood by the staff at the local old-age home where it is reduced to the covert whisperings of senile old women (146). The very narrativizing of Calum's deteriorating personal and cultural history in English underlines the ongoing erosion of identity confronting his community. Colin Nicholson notes that MacLeod's work memorializes

an immigrant culture from the Highlands and Islands at a time when its historical purchase is beginning to slip: both memorializing and since he is writing in English, enacting that moment of slippage. (Nicholson 98)

Calum initiates his lineal investigation with his grandfather—a man he knows "only through recreated images of his life and death" (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 140)—by trying to decode the sole message the man leaves for him, a rather cryptic inscription on the rafters of the family barn: "[W]e are the children of our own despair, of Skye and Rum and Barra and Tiree" (139). It is with some trepidation, however, that Calum begins to trace his lineage. He responds to his grandfather's message with a question: "what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?" (140). To answer this question Calum turns to his family's crofter past, and to the "prickly Scottish thistles" that connote the road to Rankin's Point as a route to his family's history (129). Calum's grandmother transmits the family history to her grandson through the music of the dispossessed crofters she plays upon the violin that "came from the Scotland of

her ancestors from the crumbled foundations that now dot and haunt Lochaber's shores" (138-139). Like the Highland River in Gunn's novel, Calum's grandmother is the source of identity in MacLeod's short story. Not only does she provide Calum with the MacCrimmon lament "Never More Shall I Return" (*Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 139)—music that Calum recognizes as "our sound" (149)—but she also serves as a personal exemplar of survival.² She is a survivor by birthright of both the Highland Clearances and Canadian "Clearances" to which she refuses to acquiesce. In the conflict between Calum's grandmother and "'authorities'" from Halifax MacLeod creates a syncretic moment where the cultural and historical legacies of Scotland and Canada merge. In a situation reminiscent of the Highland Clearances that brought her family to Canada, Calum's grandmother is confronted by people who suggest, given her situation as a single mother in an increasingly isolated and economically depressed region, that she move or "put up some of her children for adoption" (150). In explaining her resolve against the authorities the grandmother draws an analogy between her situation in Canada and that of her ancestors in nineteenth-century Scotland: "I would never have my children taken from me to be scattered about like the down of a dead thistle" (150). Unlike her own ancestral mother, Scotland, who was coerced into scattering her people about the globe during the Clearances, Calum's grandmother endeavours to preserve the sanctity of life and of family.

Through the music and stories of his shaman-like grandmother Calum unearths his past to create responses to his own question concerning the significance of unseen ancestral islands: cultural continuity and self-preservation. He attempts to prolong his own life with the history of the MacCrimmons:

[S]ometimes when seeing the end of our present our past looms ever larger because it is all we have or think we know. I feel myself falling back into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future. (153)

Similar to Kenn's travels through time to comprehend the "source" or "eternity" (*Highland River* 212), Calum attempts to traverse time, to

go back through the superstitions and the herbal remedies and the fatalistic war cries, and the haunting violins and the

cancer cures of cobwebs. Back through the knowledge of being and its end as understood through the second sight and spectral visions and the intuitive dog and the seabird's cry. (*Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 153-154)

Calum takes as his own the supernatural gifts of the MacCrimmons: "the gift of music and the gift of foreseeing their own deaths" (139). The music of the MacCrimmons alerts Calum to the death of his grandmother, and just as MacCrimmon "quietly [composed] the music of his own death," so Calum in his first-person narrative creates the music of his own end (154). Calum's leukaemia is emblematic of the insidious disease of migration, a hemorrhaging that, coupled with assimilation, threatens to destroy the Gaelic community of Cape Breton.

Kenn's Highland River is also a world steeped in the supernatural. The river's relationship to him as a portal to the times of the crofters and other vanished peoples of the glen is certainly not a manifestation of the empirical world (Gunn 8). Both Kenn and Calum live on landscapes haunted by a sense of desolation and loss. The abandoned "fallen houses" and the empty hills of Rankin's Point (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 133) recall the ruins of "the ordinary rectangular croft houses" of Ken's glen, burned down by nineteenth-century landowners when they cleared the ancestors of Kenn and Calum from the Highlands (*Highland River* 242). The disappeared people of Rankin's point, although they were not forcibly and brutally evicted from their land like the Scots crofters, were, nonetheless, victims of an economic disparity which forced them to move west.

When Calum and Kenn unearth the moment of their dislocation—the Highland Clearances (although for Kenn this is only one in a series of dislocating episodes)—they discover a new equilibrium. Kenn recognizes that he is one of the folk and learns why the history of England was always problematic for him:

[F]or on this night too—though he did not realise it until he began to retrace his steps by his Highland river with some care—substance was given to his belief in the folk, of whom he was one. This belief has accompanied him with an elusive assurance of power. It explains to him why in history he always found the greatest difficulty in remembering the genealogical trees of kings or dates of dynastic wars. In a

profound sense, they were of no interest to him. (*Highland River* 218)

Similarly, Calum finds the balance he has been struggling to attain when he accepts the gifts of the MacCrimmons. Prior to this point Calum grapples with the significance of his Scottish ancestry, considering the possibility that it might be a fraudulent frame of reference. The thistle brooch he makes a present of to his grandmother is emblematic of the discord within Calum; he is "struck by the falseness of the brooch [sic] . . . for Scottish thistles do not twine." He thinks that "perhaps at the time of its purchase [he] was being more symbolic than [he] ever thought" (*Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 142). The unconscious symbolism Calum presently detects suggests a desire for unity: the conflation of the fragments of Scottish family history with his life and his family in Canada. The Scottish past and Canadian present merge in the syncretic episode of Calum's death:

[T]he music that my grandmother played in the long-ago morning of this day moves slowly through my mind. I cannot tell if it comes from without or from within and then it does not seem to matter. The darkness rises within me in dizzying swirls and seems to yearn for that other darkness that lies without. I reach for the steadying gate post or the chair's firm seat but there is nothing for the hand to touch. And then as with the music, the internal and the external darkness reach to become as one. Flowing toward one another they become enjoined and indistinct and as single as perfection. Without a seam, without a sound, they meet and unite all. (156)

The Scottish ancestral past—the darkness of the diseased blood and the music that rise within Calum—becomes viable for him when it merges with the darkness that is without, the Cape Breton evening and death. The music has created a symmetry within; the narrator contextualizes the dislocation of the Lament of the MacCrimmons so that it is easily transposed to the "Clearances" of Rankin's Point, the loss of family history, and his own impending death. A similar sense of balance associated with death and history is found in Neil Gunn's *Highland River*. Contemplating his relationship to the vanished peoples of the glen, Kenn discerns the cyclical nature of life and death: "the carcasses

putrefy and decay leaving clean bones that he and Beel may throw at each other in summer fields. Time deals with decay evenly, and all the mess of blood and flesh is resumed into the black aseptic ooze" (*Highland River* 119). The bones Kenn plays with are the bones of history that he unearths on his archaeological dig for the folk, for self-identity, and for the vanished peoples such as Calum and the MacCrimmons. In this context Calum's sense of equilibrium becomes significant; it coincides with his fall from the rock promontory of Rankin's Point, off the east coast of Canada toward the "long left and never seen" islands of Scotland (*Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 140).

In their attempts to hear each other's music—to define the faint sounds that are left in the vacuum of received history, sounds emanating from the intersecting and dislocating moments of Canada and Scotland—Calum and Kenn create ancestral and personal narratives which further develop their perception of self, empowering them to move forward in, and in Calum's case out of, time. MacLeod's cross-cultural dialogue with the Clearances depicted in Gunn's *Highland River* is emphasized in what Calum refers to as the "timelessness" of the white-faced Cheviots kept by his grandmother (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 133). The ending of MacLeod's story leaves Rankin's Point to the Cheviot sheep and other livestock after the deaths of Calum and his grandmother, evoking a connection with the Cheviot domination of the Highland glens following the forced emigration of the last century. Calum's ruminations before his fatal fall further parallel the disintegration of the Scottish Highland community with the dissolution of the contemporary Gaelic-speaking community in Cape Breton: "[F]or the first time in the centuries since the Scottish emigrations there is no human life at the end of the dark road" (155).

In a conversation with Colin Nicholson, MacLeod discusses the significance of what he detects in the empty spaces of history that exist between the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Canada's Cape Breton:

... if you look at my ancestry and my wife's ancestry, there's no-one who's not from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. All our ancestors bear those names: MacLeod, Maclellan, Macdonald, Rankin, Beaton, Walker, MacIssaac, Gillis, MacDonnell. ... In 1985, this is still who we are. And

that is why there is this felt affinity on the part of those who emigrated for those who remain. . . . Although my wife has adequate Gaelic we are really the first generation where the breakdown of that culture is beginning to occur. (92)

For both MacLeod and Gunn the dislocation and cultural erasure of the nineteenth-century Highland Clearances have deep resonances in the twentieth-century communities they write out of, where the disintegration of Highland culture is perpetuated, contemporaneously, through migration.

Scottish and Canadian writers such as Gunn, MacLeod, Chrichton Smith, and Laurence textualize the historically dynamic, culturally disruptive, and in this disruption which is cultural transfer, highly syncretic moments of the Clearances when our two cultures intersect, to establish personal identity in the present, and make visible, through the subjectivity of personal narrative, what received history has rendered invisible. In *Highland River* and "The Road to Rankin's Point" the invisible is made visible (or the inaudible audible), through a narratorial reconstruction of disappeared peoples from the inscriptions they have made on the spiritual and physical landscape of the community as these are manifest in the foundations of abandoned crofts, oral narratives and music. Ultimately, these traces or markings, which simultaneously signify the historicity of heritage and cultural dislocation, shape the narratives of those who write out of the empty spaces of history on both sides of the Atlantic to construct identifying relationships with their cultural heritage and touch that part of their present self that has been obfuscated by historiography. Calum's text not only gathers the traces of his vanished forbears but also constitutes his own inscription on the spiritual landscape, a trace that remains after his disappearance from Rankin's Point.

As citizens of an immigrant or multicultural society Canadians occupy a space between worlds and much of our literature traverses these worlds, often emplotting our attempts to come to terms with that other world we or our ancestors were dislocated from. Whether these narratives which confront moments of dislocation are found in the ethnic-Scottish writings of Margaret Laurence and Alistair MacLeod, in the ethnic-Indian writings of Rohinton Mistry, or in the ethnic-Italian writings of Nino Ricci, cross-cultural or comparative studies offer the critic a

viable and potentially insightful approach for reading a wide range of Canadian texts.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of English marginalization of Scottish culture see Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989).

² Another lament from this same MacCrimmon clan, "The Lament for the Children," memorializes the deterioration of Gaelic culture, and adumbrates the eviction of a Gaelic community in Gunn's *Butcher's Broom* (*Butcher's Broom* 247).

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