

## ALISTAIR MACLEOD: THE WORLD IS FULL OF EXILES

### *SCL Interview by Laurie Kruk*

LK I had planned to ask you about the appeal of the short story, and if you think you'll want to write in any other form, but I believe you *are* starting to do so.

AM That's what I'm doing right now: trying to write a novel. It's called *No Great Mischief If They Fall*.

LK Do you find writing it more difficult than writing short stories?

AM I find it different in that you've got to sustain a storyline for a long time, and history shifts as you're working on a novel. I think one of the advantages of the short story is, it's something like a hundred-yard dash. . . . When you're dealing with a novel, you have to balance everything, you have to wonder if what you were saying two years ago is as relevant, in the present moment, as it was when you began. It's sort of like a long walk—like walking to Montreal, that's how I think of it. I've been working on it now for about five years.

LK What does the title mean?

AM It's the statement that General James Wolfe, he who gave us Canada, made concerning Highland soldiers, at the siege of Québec. And the idea was, you put them in the front lines because they would be big and strong, and they would get up there first—

LK And take a lot of bullets. . . .

AM Yes. And if they didn't get up, it would be "no great mischief if they fell."

LK So, what is the appeal, for you, of the short story form?

AM I think it's sort of an intense moment, and I don't know if I would compare it to the lyric poem, but it allows you to write

a letter to the world. And I think it's constrained, and I think you can deal with two or three characters in a given situation, briefly, and succinctly, and I think it's a good thing to do. I don't know about comparing various forms of literature: there are obviously splendid poems that are worth more than bad novels, although one may be longer than the other, so I think that whatever you do in a literary manner, you should do to the best of your ability and probably just leave it at that.

One might argue that one may get more literary precision, perhaps, in some of those short stories that one finds in Joyce's *Dubliners*, as opposed to *Finnegans Wake*. And some of the D. H. Lawrence short stories are splendid as well. The point is that a "good" short story may, in the end, have as much "value" as a "long" novel. Length is not as important as quality, precision, accessibility, etcetera. Better to be "good" than merely "long."

LK And what you're writing now—the novel—just demands a bigger canvas?

AM I think so. There are some things that you can accomplish in thirty pages, and some things you *cannot* accomplish in thirty pages. Actually, my short stories are generally fairly long short stories. If I have something to say, I just keep on until I've said it, and then that's the end. Length suits the "statement." Then I try to get a string to put the beads on, so that I will have a necklace at the end, rather than beads rattling round in a box.

Very often, when I write stories, I write the concluding paragraph or line when I'm about half way through. And I find that this more or less helps me because I think: "This is the last thing I'm going to say to the reader—the last paragraph or the last sentence." And this gives me a destination, and I think that you function better when you know whether you're going to Toronto or Toledo or Miami or whatever. . . .

LK Other writers have told me that short stories are not as well-received as novels—if not by critics, then perhaps by publishers. And yet you say you haven't come across this attitude yourself. You had no difficulty, it seems, getting your two collections published.

AM I think that *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976) was the first collection of short stories that McClelland and Stewart put out

that was not from someone who was also writing novels. I think Jack McClelland told me that at one time.

In the case of someone like myself, I make most of my income from teaching. So my response to that problem of marketing is, why don't I just make my work as strong as it can possibly be? But I think if you're trying to live by your pen, or by your word processor, or by whatever tool you're using, you are under different kinds of pressures. And in that case, if somebody said to you, "You should write a novel, because we can sell it easier," you may say, "Okay, even though I don't like writing novels, I'll do this." I think that maybe in my situation—I teach creative writing at the University of Windsor—I may have kind of an advantage. I'm allowed to do—within reason—whatever I want, in a literary way.

LK Who are the practitioners of the short story that you admire?

AM I admire a lot of people; I don't think I ever have anybody who's a model. . . . I think that what you try to do as a writer is try to develop a distinctive voice. And I think that one of the kind of wondrous things about literature is that no two voices are the same . . . you can't have clone writing, or why do it?

LK In one interview, you singled out William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor—

AM Those are splendid writers. Flannery O'Connor was a splendid writer. And I think it's nice to think of Flannery O'Connor as a writer who didn't write an awful *lot*, in terms of weighing the pages, or measuring them in a longitudinal manner, and who didn't *have* to write novels, but wrote splendid splendid stories.

LK And now, the obligatory question: which Canadian writers do you admire?

AM [pause] Oh, I hate doing this, because people are always going to phone up afterwards and say, "How come you didn't mention me?" [laughs] Well, Alice Munro is a very good writer. . . . And W. D. Valgardson; a story like "Bloodflowers" I think is almost the best short story ever written in Canada. And Guy Vanderhaeghe has some very very good short stories—

LK Do you think the short story is of particular interest to Canadian writers?

AM Well, it seems that very very good writing—some of the very best writing—is done by short story writers in Canada. But I don't know why that is so. The country's so tremendously huge—four thousand miles across—and the short story anthologies reflect that hugeness, I think: from Jack Hodgins to . . . perhaps to people like myself, from one coast to the other. And I think it must be almost accidental . . . I mean the Canada Council didn't put us all in a room and say, "Now we want short stories from you people." I think our excellence in short story writing evolved in the mysterious way that things do evolve.

LK I was wondering if you were especially interested in Scottish writers, given your Celtic roots?

AM Well, my work is very very popular in Scotland; I had a letter the other day from a man who wants to translate the stories into Gaelic, because he said they were the most Gaelic stories he knew. . . .

LK That's fascinating . . . and you said "Fine, go ahead?"

AM Oh sure. I think that once you write these pieces, there's no need being precious about them. And they've been widely translated . . . they've been translated into Urdu [the second language in Pakistan] and they've been translated into French, and they've been translated into Russian, and they've been translated into Norwegian, and so on. So I think it's nice to realize that well-crafted work can travel, you know, and that people can appreciate the work in Russia or Norway. It's very popular in Scandinavia, perhaps because Scandinavians inhabit the same kind of cold landscape, surrounded by water.

LK I'm quoting from an interview you did with Andrew Garrod. You said, "I'm interested in the idea of mistaking silence for lack of feeling or stupidity or something like that." What do you mean by silence? And is this related in any way to *men's* silence?

AM In that interview with Garrod, we were talking at one point about professional athletes . . . people who are tremendously articulate, shall we say, with their bodies, but who, when they're

interviewed, cannot describe what they do, although they can really do it. And that was what interested me when I was doing “The Closing Down of Summer” (*As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, 1986). If you’re supposed to get up on a podium and talk articulately about being a basketball player—it seems to me that has nothing to do with being a basketball player, it’s a whole other skill. And one of the things I was interested in was: if you’re in a completely verbal situation—like interviews and so on—and you’re not a verbal person, the fact that you’re not a verbal person may be mistaken for lack of intelligence or lack of feeling. The reverse would be true if interviewers were put on a baseball field or a hockey rink; they may not do very well there. So what I was interested in, was just kind of exploring what it means to not be articulate—in the acceptable way.

I don’t know if you know the Newfoundland novelist Percy Janes. He’s got a novel called *West Mall*. And there’s a scene in it in which the Newfoundlanders are getting ready to go to Toronto to look for work. And when they go for the interview, they start to perspire. . . . Because they’ve the wrong kind of accent. And it’s like people who come from Poland, or whatever, and have the wrong kind of accent . . . these people are nearly all silent, unless they’re speaking their own language.

LK So you’re getting at that kind of colonizing impulse . . . which says, “If you’re not like us, you’re wrong”—?

AM Yes . . . or you may be perceived to be that way.

LK Your stories return our attention to the physical life, to the life of the body. And this life of the body is as longed for as the landscapes, and the cultural communities the protagonists leave behind. In “The Closing Down of Summer,” as you pointed out, there’s a kind of longing. . . . I mean the narrator is still living this existence, but the mood the story creates is almost one of regret . . . at the fact that this is a passing way of life—

AM I’m not sure if that’s true. It’s a passing way of life; I’m not sure if he really regrets it, he’s just thoughtful about it. The situation you’ve got here is a whole lot of people who encourage their children not to do what they do . . . and the children do not rebel against this advice, they accept it! What happens, as I say in the story, is that when children take that advice, they become

alienated—from the men, in this case, who give the advice. And there may be a kind of sadness in that.

Also, I think what I was interested in is that people—be they male or female—people who lay their bodies on the line every day, have a different risk factor than do I, as a university professor. These people who work in that way, ticking in the back of their minds, is the possibility that they may lose their lives, just doing what they do. Not because they're stupid, or not because they're careless or anything like that, but because this is what they do. And that adds a different dimension to their working lives. They are people who are risking their physical lives in their day-to-day occupations. I mean I may flop over from a heart attack at my desk, but they may flop over from a heart attack too. . . . So I was just kind of interested in that idea.

*LK* Yet it seemed in "The Closing Down of Summer" as if the protagonist were elevating the dangerous work he was doing, over what his sons were doing: jobs in law, dentistry, and so on.

*AM* No, I don't think so; I didn't mean that at all: I meant that their work would be different. They will go into different lives. "And what we're doing here"—that narrator says—"we're just using our bodies all the time, all the time, and our bodies are falling apart." These people—who are going to go into law or dentistry—they're going to pay to join the squash club because they're going to want to use their bodies, in another way. . . . I guess I was kind of interested in the idea that maybe you have to use your bodies some way or the other . . . maybe there's a middle ground, maybe there isn't. As that narrator says, "They will join expensive clubs for the pleasures of perspiration; I'm not going to do that." Nobody who works with their body ever jogs.

*LK* But what's interesting about the narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer" is that he does go to university . . . he starts university and then drops out.

*AM* Yes. Well, I see these people as big people, you know? Physically big people. And that's what they're given. Like the colour of your eyes . . . the colour of your skin. And because they're big people, they can do these things, because mines don't hire people who weigh ninety pounds. . . . I think what happens to

that narrator, is that he feels university is not enough for him. You hear this from big people—

LK They're not comfortable in the classroom chairs—

AM No, not comfortable in the chairs, and the teacher's always looking at them because they're the first person that he/she sees, and so on. . . . So they kind of say, "I don't know if I'm *made* for this completely sedentary life. I can read the poems, I can write the papers, I can do this—but I just don't know if it's enough for me. So I'll go and do this instead." And of course, he's got a history of mining, because it's what his family does. And so he goes and does that. High physical risk, that's kind of what I'm interested in.

I think the bottom line is: all writers write about what they care about. And they care about very different things. A good example, in Canada, is some of the writing that comes out of Québec, which is a kind of contained place. And Quebecers have a history that is not a melting pot history. I think in Newfoundland you get this too—although they write in English—there's a kind of fierceness that grows out of their history. And this is very different, say, than generations of people who grew up in the mall, or somewhere like that, who do not feel fiercely about anything other than their record collection. . . .

"What do you worry about?" Here's an example: people in Canada worry about winter. There's a whole concern of big worries and little worries that run all across Canada. People trying to get their snow tires, trying to get their anti-freeze, trying to get their house winterized. Nobody worries about these things in Los Angeles. So I think your literature kind of comes out of what your concerns are—I don't mean worry being negative—but what do you think about when you wake up at half past five in the morning? You think about whether your car will start. . . .

LK "Winter Dog" (*Birds*) opens with the worries about driving a long distance through the winter storm to see a dying relative.

AM Yes. I don't think that those worries or concerns are any better, or any worse, than the worries and concerns of people who live in the Southwest, like Arizona and New Mexico. But they are specific to a certain landscape. I think landscape just has an awful lot to do with all literature. I think *Wuthering Heights* couldn't have been written coming from any other landscape. . . .

LK Your point puts into question the whole “regionalist” label, because then every writer has their region . . . every writer has their landscape. Even if it’s an urban landscape: Morley Callaghan writing about Toronto, or Mordechai Richler writing about Montreal.

AM Oh sure. Mordechai Richler writes about a certain area of Montreal—his region of Montreal.

LK Ken MacKinnon has said, “There is a sense in which all of MacLeod’s work is more or less part of one great story with a single great theme: the long homeward journey from exile.” What do you think of that description, “the long homeward journey from exile”?

AM I think what he’s finding in the stories is that sometimes people do things that they don’t want to, and I think this is one of the central issues of that short story “The Boat” (*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*) . . . that sometimes people choose to do what they do not want to do—perhaps out of love, or perhaps out of necessity, or whatever—and I think that’s what MacKinnon was talking about. A lot of these characters are successful perhaps, but they feel exiled. They find themselves living their lives in places where they are perhaps not happy.

I think the world is full of exiles—you meet them all over the place—people who would really rather be back in Greece, back in the former Yugoslavia or wherever . . . but who are unable to be where their hearts might lie.

LK In both collections, you consistently adopt a male perspective. Is this conscious or unconscious?

AM Actually, in the story “Island” [published separately in a specialty edition by Thistle-down Press in 1989], I have written from the female perspective. I just think about the story, and the question I ask myself is “Who gets to tell the story?” Because that changes everything. . . . For instance, my short story, “The Boat”: if the mother were to tell that story, it would be a very very different story.

LK So would you say your work is autobiographical?

AM No.

LK Even though you’re drawing on your Celtic roots, and your regional affiliation—?



AM Oh, the regions are there for everybody, but I'm not telling the story of my life. It seems very autobiographical, but I think it seems very autobiographical because I work hard to make it seem true. Sometimes people who've only read one story of mine, will come up and say "Oh it's too bad that you've lost your father." My response to that is, "I didn't lose my father at all." And they say, "Oh but I thought it must be true." But I'm kind of glad to hear that, because I think that is what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to create an illusion of reality. So that when the Ancient Mariner tells his tale, it sounds pretty true. I think Alice Munro's phrase is "Not true but real, not real but true."

LK But if you invent too much material, experiences that you can't get close to, that doesn't work either—

AM That's right, absolutely. The reader will find you out. But you can know things through other ways than experience. You can read things, and you can imagine things, but it has to have—I think—the ring of authenticity. You have to keep saying to the reader "Do you believe me?" And the reader has to keep saying, "Yes, I believe you; I'll turn the page."

LK This makes it clear to me why the short story is so appealing to you; you are in some way tapping into folklore, oral story-telling. In "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun," for instance, with the story of the grey dog . . . and the appeal to oral tradition in the opening. Even in "Vision" (*Birds*), there are all these folkloric stories about blindness—woven together in a much more intricate story—but still it has an oral quality, because of the various narrators telling tales within it—

AM Well, I'm kind of interested in that, because I know that story has obviously existed longer than literacy has . . . so there are all kinds of people who can tell stories, who can't read or write.

What I'm interested in with some of those folklore stories, and this is true in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" too, is that what is folklore to some people is truth to others. . . . So I think of people who live their lives according to folklore as being somewhat similar—I don't mean this in any derogatory way—to people who live their lives by certain strict religious principles. So if you're outside that religion, you don't understand why people want to go to Mecca, or why people have certain dietary rules or why people

wear certain clothes or anything like that: you just think of them as quaint. But inside the Muslim mind, they are not quaint; they are *real*. They say, "You may think that's funny, but we'll *die* for this. This is the way we live. This is who we are."

What I was dealing with in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" was this stupid man who goes into a culture that he doesn't understand, and runs around in it, trying to get his thesis finished. But he doesn't understand what he's collecting, because he's too dim, because he's there with his little blinders on. . . . I'm interested in the question, "What is it worth?" Grandma's old rocking chair may be an antique to somebody, and somebody else may throw it in the garbage, and buy a chair from K-mart. . . .

LK Would you describe yourself as a realist writer?

AM Yes, I think so. What I think of, in terms of realistic writing, is: telling the truth as I happen to see it. I think Raymond Carver calls it "bringing the news." I don't see myself doing "romantic" writing. I'm satisfied enough with realistic writing.

I would like to think that what I do will last, will stand the test of time. I look at people around me and I say, "Now this will last." For example, the writing of David Adams Richards. What he's doing is "real" in that kind of tragic sense, somewhat similar to what Thomas Hardy did: people trying to live their lives in a certain place and a certain time. And in a hundred years, that work will just really really be standing. I think Sandra Birdsell's work will be standing. And you can say "What about the other hundred and sixty people—"

LK "That I haven't mentioned yet—"

AM —but those are two who come to mind. What I tell my writing students is, "You just do the best you can, and it will all find a home." Write from the heart.

LK That's considered old-fashioned advice . . . but it still works—?

AM It has always worked.

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