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ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S WRITING AS AN APOLOGY TO SCOTTISH HERITAGE IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Scottish emigration to North America is certainly one of the most relevant events in Scottish history. In Canada, Scottish immigrants and their descendants have contributed widely to the formation of Canadian society and culture. In the literary field, writers of Scottish origin as Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence have attained recognition for their work, and certain elements of the Scottish heritage are seen without difficulty in their work. The significance of Scotland is even more deeply felt in the stories of Alistair MacLeod, whose original Cape Breton tales examine the lives of displaced Scots who have frequently had to face difficulty and hardship in their new environment. Family history, oral tradition, nostalgia, clan loyalty, and the connection between Scotland and Nova Scotia have an influence in the lives of most of MacLeod's characters.

This contribution is aimed to establish the ways in which Scotland is shown in Canadian literature written by authors of Scottish descent. Its objective is firstly to broadly discuss the idea of Scotland in Canadian literature, and then, more concretely, to examine the importance of Scotland and Scottish heritage in the stories of Alistair MacLeod. His revealing stories come across more as an oral narrative than as a written one. The oral tradition is an important aspect of the Scottish Gaelic community which MacLeod's family belongs to, and this fact shows the role of this heritage in his work.

Keywords: Scottish emigration, Scottish tradition, Canadian literature of Scottish origin, Alistair MacLeod short stories, Cape Breton, etc.

Introduction

Alistair Macleod's *Island: The Complete Stories* begins "Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea". Then the entry continues, "And the man had a dog of which he was very fond of". And there you have the basic elements of an Alistair MacLeod story: Dog, Family, and Sea. The author mixes these elements into a surprisingly infinite variety of configurations, always with the same precise, confident, quiet language.

His big theme is the abandonment of the rural. Though his characters live in the fishing communities of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, the seaside isn't a place where they dwell permanently. In half the stories, young men and boys feel a pull toward the deepness and the centre of the country. In the other half, academically successful middle-aged men return to the wild eastern coast of Canada to try to claim the life they left behind. The two dilemmas are impossible to solve – no one can be both a city mouse and a country mouse – and MacLeod wisely doesn't offer a solution.

The singing of the writing

What makes his writing sing, though, is the specificity of his descriptions of rural life. He tells you how things work, exactly: "The sheep move in and out of their lean to shelter, restlessly stamping their feet or huddling together in tightly packed groups. A conspiracy of wool against the cold". The people here are ultimately defined by the physical world, and MacLeod has a farmer's visceral feel for geography. As he writes in "*The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*": "Even farther out, somewhere beyond Cape Spear lays Dublin and the Irish coast; far away but still the nearest land and closer now than is Toronto or Detroit". This is regional fiction in the best sense: it belongs to one perfectly evoked place.

These 16 short stories that span 30 years of his life evoke the lives of the people of his native Cape Breton Island. The place itself is conjured as a character. The stories are anchored by descriptive passages of lobster fishing, the gray waves of the Atlantic, the deep freeze of winter and the Nova Scotian dawn. Coming-of-age experiences are rendered through pivotal moments: "*The Return*" describes a first-time visit to the island through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy, and "*In the Fall*" evokes an incident on a family farm and a boy's growing comprehension of the things that are out of his parents' control. "*Second Spring*", the only story to hit a comic note in the collection; it is the tale of a seventh-grade boy's desire to breed the perfect calf. One of MacLeod's hallmarks is the nesting of tales within tales: in "*The Road to Rankin's Point*", a dying young man who returns to his grandmother's house high among the island's treacherous cliffs relays the earlier story of his grandfather's death and the harsh but determined life that followed. Themes of family, work, superstition and Scottish tradition enlarge these beautifully crafted stories.

Alistair MacLeod, who was born in 1936 and raised among an extended family in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, presents a powerful collection of short stories set on Canada's Eastern shore, where the traditions and Gaelic language of transplanted Scots continue in a harsh new world. All of these affecting, elegiac tales focus on the strong ties of loving kin, particularly the link between fathers and sons. Fathers share the experience of work with their sons, and boys puzzle over family events and tragedies and learn to be men in the close-knit communities. Sadly, as times change, fathers lose their sons, who become educated men and leave the land and sea for professions in the city.

MacLeod's characters are deeply touching and memorable, and their simple lives are rich with loyalty and affection for their families and way of life. The sumptuous language, which immerses the reader in this stunning but unrelenting land, begs to be read aloud. These slow, beautiful stories, resolute and resonant, are small masterpieces: apparently simple but actually crafted with enormous skill and precision, they are all concerned with the complexities and mysteries of the human heart, the unbreakable bonds and unbridgeable chasms between man and woman, parent and child. Steeped in memory and myth and washed in the brine and blood of the long battle with the land and the sea, these stories celebrate a passionate engagement with the natural world and a continuity of the generations in the face of transition, in the face of love and loss.

A Critic's Approach

As John MacGahern points out, Alistair MacLeod's stories have a uniqueness that is rare in the writing of any time. This quality is easily recognisable but it is almost impossible to describe. A different kind of genius marks every magical page of *The Great Gatsby* and *The rich boy* and stories like *May Day*, yet in much of Scott Fitzgerald's other work, where this rare quality is missing, the writing never rises above the level of a competent journeyman, in spite of its unfailing good manners and charm.

In true work we see a talent dramatising a particular area of human experience within a recognisable social setting. Once the talent moves on, outside those limitations we see it begin to fail, or to work at a less exciting level. McLeod's careful work never appears to stray outside what quickens it, and its uniqueness is present in every weighted sentence and the smallest of gestures. He writes about people an the way of life in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, that has continued relatively unchanged for several generations, since the first settlers went there from Scotland at the time of the clearances. They work as fishermen, miners, smallholders, loggers, lighthouse keepers, migrant workers. They live in a dramatically beautiful setting provided mostly by nature and hostile to much human endeavour. Animals too have their own place within this proud and fragile interdependence and are part of a fierce and unsentimental tribal affection. The poetic, the religious, and the superstitious instincts are always close. As we come to know this world, it is poised on the edge of extinction, like the bald eagles Macleod writes about so well:

He looked up to the sound of the whooshing eagle's wings. They were flying up the mountain…

The eagles had known other seasons and circumstances when their universe was threatened:

And had seen them (the male) in the aerial courtship of their mating… Had seen come together and with talons locked…

Macleod's world is masculine, in its strengths and its vulnerabilities. The men and women of the stories inhabit separate worlds. They are drawn together for love or procreation, and then part, withdrawing further and further into their own separate worlds:

Now my wife seems to have gone permanently into a world of… soap operas that fill her… afternoons.

Sometimes they drift apart naturally through absence, as in the case of the migrant workers – through silence, or the inability to communicate, or through sudden death. This is stated with gentleness and sympathy and palpable regret, but it also seen to be unavoidable as fate. In the moving and beautiful 'In the Fall? It is the actual violence that their conflict engenders in the child that draws the man and women together:

My father puts his arms around my mother's waist and she does not remove them as I have seen her do.

It is no accident that the man and the woman work together, against all the conventions, in the building of their house, and sing together as they work in the one pure love the stories detail:

> *On clear still days all the people living down along the mountain's side and even below in the valley could hear the banging of their hammers and the youthful power of their voices…*

Such is the purity and perfection that it can only endure finally in song:

Every note was perfect, as perfect and clear as the waiting water droplet hanging on the fragile leaf…

Often the men need dangerous work for their own physical self-expression. Sometimes they are like gladiators, where women

have no place: For we are always expanding the perimeters of our seeming incarceration. We are always moving…

The miners can be seen in their enclosures as a metaphor for MacLeod's sophisticated yet simple, his sensuous and very supple art:

I have always wished that my children could see me at my work…

Running through the work is the deep irony that it is human ingenuity that is bringing to an end this ancient, traditional world just as MacLeod is bringing it to such vivid life. Often this is faced with grim humour, as when Archibald sells his young mare from a breed he has worked with all his life:

"This guy says, I don't know if it is true, that there is this farm outside of Montreal that it's connected to a lab or something…"
"It seemed so preposterous that Archibald was not sure how to act…"

In the largeness of the vision, even differences are viewed with the same deep sympathy and understanding as likeness:

> *She was out of the door immediately, turning her truck in a spray of gravel that flicked against his house… He was reminded, as often was, of Cora, who had been dead for some fifteen years…*

I think of the novel as the most social of all the art forms, the most closely linked to an idea of society, a shared leisure, and a system of manners. The short story does not generally flourish in such a society but comes into its own like song or prayer or superstition in poorer more fragmented communities where individualism and tradition and family and localities and chance or luck are dominant. This appears to be particularly true of Alistair MacLeod's imagined world. The form is inseparable from his material, and his sure talent is happy and at one with them both: it is as if he was sentenced to these small enclosures and made of them his plough. He has turned them into strength and a glory: the effect is the very opposite of confinement. The work has a largeness of feeling, of intellect, of vision, a great openness and generosity, even an old fashioned courtliness. The stories stand securely outside of fashion while reflecting deep change. In imagination they can move with naturalness across several generations as if all shared the same eternal day. The small world on Cape Breton opens out to the vast spaces and distances of Canada and the oceans that surround its granite coasts and their people, returning in the summer, or at Christmas, for weddings or bereavements, bringing these vast distances home. In their surefootedness and the slow, sensuous unfolding, the stories gradually acquire the richness and unity of an epic poem or an important novel. Unwittingly, or through that high art that conceals itself, we have been introduced into a complete representation of existence, and the stories take on the truth of the Gaelic songs their people sing. In the mystery of their art they take joy from that very oblivion of which they so movingly sing.

Imagery

Birds, it is about conflicts of identity, people who long left their homelands, and people that are recent immigrants; rural homelands left by the exodus of post-war European people who left their ancestors behind, landscapes and their lost kin. The cries from the exile, the desire to persevere despite the lapse of time, what it was and still is. Stories full of past moments and harsh reality.

Blood, it could be like chronicling the saga of the MacDonald family over several generations. However it is much more than that. Using an evocative style, the author goes crisscrossing family events with historical facts of Canada, the country that hosts this family of Scottish immigrants, and the strong feeling that even after two centuries, connects them with Scotland, the land of their ancestors. Alistair MacLeod gets to introduce us in a painfully beautiful myth in which the past comes to outweigh present. We are in the 80's; Alexander MacDonald is visiting his brother in Toronto where he lives immerse in alcohol and memories. And although Alexander doesn't follow the same ideas as his brother, he is unable to flee and abandon him. As the novel progresses, Alexander will find out events that are a sort of key to their family history and that constitutes, with some variations, an element which goes on from generation to generation. It is clear that with a simple but precise prose and a remarkable accuracy, where each word has its own place; Alistair MacLeod gets our attention and fascination from the first page to the last. MacLeod is undoubtedly one of the great undiscovered writers of our time.

Conclusion

Alistair MacLeod writes evocatively of family life, work and play, birth and death. The Cape Breton people have a master storyteller who depicts their community as well as Dickens depicts London but with greater humane insight. It lies before you, life's tragedy and joy.

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