THE SHIFTING SCOTTISH DIASPORA: IMAGES OF HOME IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S *NO GREAT MISCHIEF*

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Abstract

This article aims to explore some of the controversial aspects that come up when dealing with the Scottish diaspora. The ambiguous position of the country as opposed to England, as well as the history of imperialism that is to be found in its background are some of the elements that complicate and question its very existence. *No Great Mischief*, by Alistair MacLeod, is a novel set in Nova Scotia, Canada, whose characters constantly turn to the land of their ancestors, Scotland, in order to find connections and give meaning to their present lives. This article discusses the importance of these acts of re-construction, as well as the relevance of the other 'homeland', Cape Breton, for the characters of this novel and for the elusive concept of the Scottish diaspora.

Keywords: diaspora, Scotland, homeland, myth, colonisation, class, globalization.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es explorar algunos de los aspectos controvertidos que surgen a la hora de tratar con la diáspora escocesa. La posición ambigua del país en relación con Inglaterra, así como la historia de imperialismo que lo acompaña son algunos de los elementos que complican y cuestionan su existencia. *No Great Mischief*, de Alistair MacLeod, es una novela situada en Nueva Escocia, Canadá, cuyos personajes recurren continuamente a la tierra de sus ancestros, Escocia, para encontrar conexiones y otorgar sentido a sus vidas presentes. Este artículo discute la importancia de estos actos de reconstrucción, y la relevancia de otro 'hogar', Cabo Bretón, para los personajes de esta novela y para el esquivo concepto de la diáspora escocesa.

Palabras clave: diáspora, Escocia, hogar, mito, colonización, clase, globalización.

No Great Mischief is a novel by Nova Scotian writer Alistair MacLeod, originally published in 2000. Set in a small town in Cape Breton, it narrates the lives of a family of Scottish descent, Clan Calum Ruadh. The story is portrayed

through the eyes of Alexander MacDonald, who unfolds a narrative line that spans a period of two hundred years: the memories of his own childhood are intertwined with stories and pieces of history about his ancestors that are handed down to him by his grandparents, thus constantly making references to the close and distant pasts. The presence of Scotland is very significant not only for the protagonist's personal story but for the whole community he lives in. Throughout the novel, it is possible to observe the influence of Scottish history and culture in this region, through the inheritance of several aspects of Celtic culture, such as the clannish family structure, the Gaelic language, poems, music, rituals, etc. It is for these reasons that this novel is emblematic of what can be called a Scottish diaspora in Canada. However, the notion of Scottish diaspora is a controversial point that needs to be clarified in order to analyze it against the contents of this novel. Aside from recent changes in mobility (of people as well as of information) in this era of globalization that affects, not only this, but all diasporas, there are other elements to be taken into consideration in the Scottish case, such as its origins and the constructions of the homeland. Although Scotland consistently appears as the recognized place of origin and focus of nostalgia, certain parts of the text suggests that the homeland is to be located in the Canadian region of Cape Breton, where most of the action takes place. This further complicates the already slippery concept of the Scottish diaspora and calls for a revision of its scope and its components.

Perhaps the main controversial point that arises when analyzing this novel within a diasporic framework is the circumstances under which the Scottish diaspora originally emerges. Traditional or more widely acknowledged concepts of diaspora indicate that the dispersal of people from their homeland to other locations should be forced or, at least, induced. How does a movement that stems from an imperial enterprise fit in this context of trauma and victimization? Most of the destinations of what constitutes the Scottish diaspora territories (like the US, Canada, Australia or New Zealand) were settler-invader colonies; that is, colonizers conquered those lands and established there, often by displacing or annihilating the indigenous population. The polemic role of the settler has been thoroughly questioned and discussed.[1] In these colonies the settlers have to perform the role of agents of imperial expansion, while, at the same time, being away or separated from it. They maintain a double position. They are privileged with respect to the native populations of the colony: in the imperial context they are empowered to take their lands and impose their moral values and cultural standards; on the other hand they

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[1] In *Splitting Images*, Hutcheon (1991:74-75) suggests that the situation of the settler cannot be compared to that of Third World countries; as also do Arun P. Mukherjee in "Interrogating Postcolonialism" and Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge in "What is Post(-)colonialism" (quoted in Johnston and Lawson 2005).

hold a marginalized position within the Empire, of which they form part but to which they do not fully belong.

Their geographical or spatial alienation is also understood in cultural terms. Cultural models, paradigms and sets of values are transplanted and have to be reshaped in order to fit in the new environment. Johnston and Lawson assert that settlers were "subject to greater constraints upon their freedom and their ability to participate in governance than the citizens of the 'home' country. They were ungovernable, uncultured: as 'colonials' they were second-class –belated or feral– Englishmen" (2005:363). From this displacement comes a cultural and intellectual anxiety and insecurity that is usually ascribed to the legitimate, Third World subject whose colonized condition is not questioned. While functioning as agents of colonization, another pattern of behaviour can be observed in settler colonies, which is traditionally associated to the colonized subject: that of mimicking the culture and values of the imperial centre, which they are supposed to represent. Not being in the centre any more, the enactment of those values and authority turns out not to be as 'authentic' as those in the mother country. As Johnston and Lawson put it "this is mimickry in Bhabha's special sense [...] since the authority is enunciated *on behalf of, but never quite as* the Imperium" (*ibid.*:369). Thus the settler struggles between perpetrating, asserting or translating a colonial enterprise and searching for the privilege of authenticity that can only be enjoyed by the native population. Is it due to this desire of constructing an autonomous national narrative, coveting an indigenous position while being held by values which are not authentically their own that it can be said that settlers are simultaneously colonizer and colonized subjects. In Canadian literature in particular, this sense of alienation prevails until well into the twentieth century. Canadian writers (or rather, Canadian writers who descend from white settlers), were bound to follow and imitate the paradigms established by the imperial centre, so that it can be said that, until recently, there has been no Canadian literature per se. Margaret Laurence, a 60s and 70s writer of Scottish descent, declares in an interview that she sees herself as part of a "second generation of non-colonial writers" (Twigg 1988:265). She explains that, during the generation before her, "a book wasn't considered any good if it didn't get a seal of approval in London or New York" and that "when [she was] in high school [they] never read one Canadian book" (*ibid.*:265, 266). The process of disengagement with colonial intellectual and aesthetic models and impositions does not begin to be palpable until the publications of writers such as Hugh MacLennan or Gabrielle Roy and then only to culminate in a period of self-conscious questioning and contestation about what really constitutes Canadian identity and its literature.

All these considerations have sometimes resulted in a victimization of the figure of the settler. Though it is true that there exists a feeling of self-awareness and inferiority on their part, it is impossible to deny that settlers are, at the same

time, agents of oppression. Colonizers, be it settlers or otherwise, claimed the right to exploit and invade foreign lands, a right which is legitimated by the project of imperial expansion. They participate in this imperial mentality by which they not only removed (sometimes annihilated) indigenous populations, but also imposed a hegemonic system of European values on them. It is due to these aspects of the imperial enterprises they see themselves involved in that some critics render the term "settler" inaccurate. It has been proposed that it would be more appropriate to talk about 'invader-settler' colonies "to emphasize the violence that the single, ostensibly benign, term 'settler' concealed" (Johnston and Lawson 2005:362).

The implications of this invader-settler status lead to conclude that the reasons which drove colonists to their quest for territorial expansion cannot be compared to the experience of those individuals who went into exile, migrated as political refugees or were otherwise forcibly expelled from their homelands. Critics such as Robin Cohen have proposed to expand the scope of the idea of diaspora, to include those communities that originated as a result of colonial expansion; what he calls "imperial diasporas". According to Cohen, diasporas should entail the "dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically" or "in search for work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions" (1997:26). Imperial diasporas are those that result from the settlement of people who migrate from a centre in order to expand its territorial and political dominion. These diasporas, Cohen argues, are "marked by a continuing connection with the homeland, a deference to and imitation of its social and political institutions and a sense of forming part of a grand imperial design" (*ibid.*:67).

However, even when the presence of such entrepreneurial diasporas is acknowledged, it is still difficult to reconcile them with other instances of diasporas in which trauma was a decisive factor, such as the African diaspora. When William Safran's consideration that diasporans "believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it" (1991:83) is taken into account, it becomes even harder to apply discourses of diasporas to settler societies. It would be paradoxical to talk about diasporas in these contexts, when it is precisely the descendants of those settlers who have become the mainstream part of the societies they live in; and these societies often act as host societies to other diasporans, actively contributing to the process of alienation Safran refers to. In other words, rather than being victims of hostility in alien lands, settlers and their descendants are, more often than not, the perpetrators of those hostilities.

In this respect, it can be said that Scottish settlers and their descendants occupy a rather ambivalent position. While it is true that they form part of the British Empire, their own history of internal colonialism complicates the notion of Scottish

settlers as part of a mainstream society. Within Britain, Scotland has maintained an inferior position in relation to the more powerful England; throughout history, Scottish heritage and traditions have been threatened by assimilation with the dominant English culture. In this struggle to preserve their own culture, Scottish people in Scotland and abroad have cultivated a strong sense of ethnicity and collective identity. Once again it is possible to observe that, in the expansion of the British Empire, the Scots have played an important role. This, however, does not prevent the formation of a conception, on the part of the Scots, of a colonized mentality, even in a colonial context. On the contrary, being away from their country augments the feeling of alienation and nostalgia for better past times. For these reasons some critics such as Edward Cowan have established a parallelism between Canada and Scotland, being both countries which occupy an uncertain position, in the shadow of "their more powerful southern neighbours" (1999:67). In aesthetic terms, Elizabeth Waterston suggests that the particularity of the geographical and political contexts in Canada and Scotland has created a nexus between them to the point that their literatures complement each other:

> The situation in each nation and in its literature seems to clarify that of the other. Here are two northern nations, ironic and sentimental, each quietly resentful of the stronger, more affluent neighbour lying south of the national border, indifferent to or unaware of the impact of its culture on others. Here are two sets of writers whose literary strategies and structures have been sharpened and maybe warped by the northernness, the doubleness, the angular sparseness of their heritage, and the pressure of alien alternatives. (2001:8-9)

Thus, both countries share a set of historical particularities that challenge the essentializing, fixed opposition between colonizer and colonized by blurring the lines that divide them and conjugating in one subject the apparently irreconcilable figures of First (oppressor) and Third (oppressed) world inhabitants.

Another factor that contributes to the establishment of the Scottish diaspora as a 'legitimate' diaspora is the element of exile that is often attributed to its causation. The Highland Clearances are commonly referred to as the cause behind the depopulation and massive migration movements that took place in the Highlands of Scotland in the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Clearances were an agrarian transformation process by which people were expelled from communal lands by the landlords and forced to live in poverty in the coast or migrate. According to academic historians, the Clearances did not entail the degree of violence with which they have been portrayed in the narrative of exile and, most probably, it was a growth in population and not the dispossession of their lands that forced people to migrate overseas (Ascherson 2002; Basu 2007). Thus, Paul Basu explains, the Clearances are "misidentified as the foundational trauma of the Scottish diaspora, a myth in which the Highlanders [...] suffered a genocide,

were expelled from their ancestral homeland, and were forced to live in slavery and exile overseas" (2007:200). As a result of this mythification, the Scottish diaspora gains a degree of authenticity in that it means a connection to the marginalization and violence that is often associated with the traditional concept of diaspora. On the other hand, it is easy, when focusing on a discourse of victimization, to overlook that many Scots migrated in a voluntary way, to make a fortune in the new lands and, as I already mentioned, to function as agents of colonization.

Although there are discrepancies as to their importance as the catalyst for this dispersal, their presence is very palpable in the collective imagination and one of the reasons is the exploitation of this traumatic phenomenon in literatures of migration in the Scottish diaspora. In the nineteenth century several narratives overseas focus on this dramatic event, on the bravery of a people who had to face exile. The Highlanders are thus romanticized and they "become rehabilitated in literary circles as tragic, sentimental heroes representing a lost cause" (Vance 2005:169). In the following excerpt, MacLeod comments on the psychological effects that the Clearances had on people in the Highlands: "There may be among those people a kind of sadness that they brought with them, the sadness of which we still hear. I don't know how long we can be saddled with Culloden, or with the Clearances, but while some obviously couldn't care less, perhaps meditative, thoughtful people brought that kind of sadness with them" (Nicholson 1985:98). This statement reinforces the idea that certain elements of the Highland identity are projected in the descendants of migrants, who carried with them an emotional burden that has integrally survived through time.

His fiction is one example of a narrative that incorporates the tragic event of the Clearances in the construction of a diasporic identity. Although he does not explicitly mention the episode in the novel (as he does in some of his short stories), the narrator clearly alludes to it when, talking about his ancestors' migration, he says: "Anyone who knows the history of Scotland, particularly that of the Highlands and the Western Isles in the period around 1779, is not hard-pressed to understand the reasons for their leaving" (Macleod 2001:17-18).[2] In the story that Alexander's grandfather tells him about the first Calum Ruadh and his leaving Scotland with his family, they are not portrayed as greedy colonizers who migrate to the New World in search for fortune and opportunity but rather as desperate people facing extreme poverty and eviction, for whom migration is more an act of exile than a voluntary act of conquest. When he finally arrived in Canada, Calum Ruadh started to cry, as Grandpa explains, "for his history. He had left his country and lost his wife and spoke a foreign language. He had left as a husband and arrived

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[2] In the rest of the article, Macleod's work will be referenced only by page numbers.

as a widower and a grandfather, and he was responsible for all those people clustered around him" (21-22). In using this discourse of victimization and misery, MacLeod aligns the experience of the Scottish diaspora with the other, more traditional diasporas which originate under traumatic and oppressive circumstances.

Once it becomes clear that the characters of this novel are marked by the losses of leaving their land of origin behind, the challenge remains to elucidate whether their identities are still anchored in the ancestral past or have moved forward in the new land. When dealing with diasporas, the element of the homeland appears as a key concept, as the basis for any diasporic movement: attachment to a homeland, to a greater or lesser extent, is a common factor, essential to all diasporic experiences. The idea of returning to the homeland is also present in most diasporas, and since this is not always possible in physical terms, mental or imaginary representations of the homeland emerge; what Salman Rushdie (1992) defines as "imaginary homelands." The sense of loss, detachment and displacement triggers the distortion of memory: certain elements are selected as important and enhanced, while others, relegated as irrelevant, fall into oblivion. The result, Rushdie argues, is that "we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (1992:10). It is important to bear in mind that though Rushdie speaks from the point of view of someone who has actually experienced life in the homeland, this is not the case of all diasporas, since many of them originated a long time ago. This implies that many people who identify themselves as members of a diaspora, attached to a specific homeland, may have never actually been to or seen said place. Thus, this mythologized idea of the homeland is transmitted from generation to generation, time being another factor contributing to its transformation. The Scottish diaspora is an example of an 'ancient' diaspora whose origins are to be found hundreds of years ago. Scottish diasporans naturally participate in this creative process of imaginary selection of memories, which results in an ideal homeland, detached from reality to some extent. It is important to analyze which elements are preserved and which discarded and also for what purposes and with what consequences.

One of the ways in which the mythologizing of the homeland is made patent is the general identification of Scotland with the Highlands. This is a phenomenon that originates in the homeland itself, in Scotland, where a romaticization of the Highlands takes place in the nineteenth century, in the literature of authors like Robert Burns or Walter Scott (see Harper and Vance 1999). Here, the Scotland of the clans, the tartans and the pipes is reflected; the noble, loyal Highlander portrayed in a rural utopia. This utopia is disrupted with the battle of Culloden (the last battle of the clans) and, after it, with the agrarian transformation process of the Clearances, by which people were expelled from communal lands by the landlords

and forced to live in poverty in the coast or migrate. Thus, the idea of better past times, a period before the economic shifts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is mythologized in the figure of the Highlander. This identification of the whole country with a sole ideal is carried overseas by Scottish settlers. As Celeste Ray puts it, "in today's Scottish heritage movement, participants conceive of themselves as definitely NOT Anglo-Saxon, but as something quite distinct from WASPs in both American ethnic hierarchies and in relation to ancient histories of oppression – as Celts" (2005:34).

The literary themes in the fiction of Alistair MacLeod, and especially in his novel, *No Great Mischief*, are highly charged with nostalgic reminiscences of Scotland and its culture. It is indeed the Scottish Highlands which are represented in the novel, turning it into one of the most paradigmatic works of Scottish diaspora literature. MacLeod is able to legitimately trace back his ancestors to people who migrated from the Isle of Eigg, situated in the North West of Scotland (Nicholson 1985:91). According to him, most of the people of Scottish descent currently living in Nova Scotia are related to migrants from the Highlands:

> When people from Scotland went over there, they went to a large extent in family groups from individual islands, like Eigg, and intermarried, and carried with them the whole body of whatever it is that people carry with them – folklore, emotional weight. [...] So that 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 of our ancestors bear those names [...]. 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 remained. (Nicholson 1985:92)

In the novel, the circumstances under which the protagonist's ancestors leave Scotland are very likely to be almost identical to MacLeod's own ancestors' story. Sailing from the Western Isles in 1779, Alexander's great-great-great grandfather, Calum Ruadh, embodies the stereotype of the noble Highlander: strong and loyal, fiddle-player and Gaelic-speaker. However, he admits to the fictitious nature of the chronicle of Calum Ruadh's journey, which had been circulating in his family for years: "There are some facts and some fantasies that change with our own perceptions and interests" (2001:17).

Writing from Nova Scotia provides MacLeod with a context in which 'Scottishness' is much more accessible than it would be for other Scots-Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence or Alice Munro. Although currently in decline, this region is one of the last redoubts of a Gaelic-speaking community in North America. In the novel, Gaelic songs are sung at social events such as celebrations or funerals. It is important to mark that these songs' contents and titles often have an underlying sad tone of loss and desire to go back to happier times which once again connects with the romanticization of the utopian, rural Highlands. One example is

to be found at the very beginning of the novel when Calum starts singing "'*Cumha Ceap Breatuinn',* 'Lament for Cape Breton'" (2001:13), and Alexander, the protagonist, joins him almost unconsciously; or at the funeral of one of his cousins, when they play "'Niel Gow's Lament' and '*Mo Dhachaidh*' ('My Home')" (119). Phrases in the Gaelic language are used with a leitmotiv intention, creating a pattern thanks to which by the end of the novel the reader is familiar with expressions such as "*ille bhig ruaidh"* ("the little red boy" or "the little red-haired boy"); "*Beannachd leibh",* ("good-bye", or more literally "blessings go with you"). Moreover, the use of Gaelic appears to be connected with an inner or most transcendental part of the individual. In a conversation Alexander has with his twin sister, Catherine, she mentions that their grandparents "used to dream, sometimes in English and sometimes in Gaelic, but towards the end their dreams were almost totally in Gaelic [...] It was as if they went back to the days they were younger. As if it had always been the language of their hearts" (177, 178). Gaelic is the language of the dreams and the thoughts, the one that seems to be even more natural than English, and forms part of an essence that comes to the surface in the last years of their grandparents' lives. In *Celticity in 20th Century Literature*, Leon B. Litvack analyses the value of the presence of Gaelic elements in some of Alistair MacLeod's short stories. According to him, "Gaelic provides a continuity between the living and the dead. [...] the language still survives, marking out a path of cultural continuity through the agency of a select few" (1993: 10). Gaelic language is similarly used in *No Great Mischief* as a connection to the distant past, to a part of the Scottish ancestry that seems to be inherent to the novel's protagonists.

In the novel, the Highlands seem to have been punctiliously transplanted into Cape Breton. Another way in which this continuity works is through the figure of the family, Clan Calum Ruadh, which functions as a coherent structure at the background of the novel. The names inside the Clan are repeated cyclically so that Alexander and Calum, even Catherine MacDonald bear the same names "of the previous generation and it is expected of their descendants that they will replace those whose untimely death has left a vacancy down the pit, or on the fishing boats" (Omhovére 2006). Not only are the names repeated but physical traits as well: invariably, the hair colour of all the descendants of Calum Ruadh is red or black and there is a tendency to have twin brothers in the family. These characteristics of the Clan as a group seem to absorb each of its members' individual identity who are primarily defined by these traits and their belonging to the Clan, rather than by their own distinctiveness. There is no questioning that the lives of the people who populate the region of Nova Scotia are closely connected to widespread notions of Highlandism: their traditions are profoundly indebted to the cultural background of the Highlands most of them are supposed to come from. These values have been

perpetuated from one generation to the next so that for MacLeod's characters the essence of the Scottish Highland identity remains intact.

There is a passage in the novel in which this transcendental connection becomes very apparent. It is the moment when Alexander's sister, Catherine, effects a return to Scotland, not an imaginary but a physical return. Walking in a beach in Moidart, the land of her ancestors, she is confronted by a woman, and the following conversation takes place:

> "You are from here," said the woman.
>
> "No," said my sister, "I'm from Canada."
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> "That may be," said the woman. "But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while." (147)

The woman happens to be part of clan MacDonald, and she recognizes Catherine instantly, without even having to talk to her, as really being from Scotland. Catherine accompanies the woman to her house, where she meets other members of the family and they all begin to talk as if they really were relatives who had not seen each other for just a few years:

> We talked without stopping for about five minutes, although it might have been for a longer or shorter time. I don't know. And I don't even know what we said. The words themselves being more important than what they conveyed, if you know what I mean. And then all of us began to cry. All of us sobbing, either standing or sitting on our chairs in Moidart. (150)

There is a mutual and almost silent understanding; a mystical halo surrounds the scene of the gathering. The reader is given the version of the story of Calum Ruadh's departure from the other point of view: that of the people who waved good-bye from the shore. An untouched and pristine tradition has been preserved in both sides of the Atlantic: the retelling of the same myths, the use of the Gaelic language and the same physical traits, (the woman asks if they "still have the red hair" (151) and if there is still the tendency to have twins) so that each part functions as a mirror image for the other. This idealized Scotland whose socio-cultural life seems to be fossilized and to revolve around the same archetypes as it did two centuries before– in other words, a Scotland that has stopped in time –is constructed in this passage as the place where Catherine, as descendant from Scottish migrants, really belongs, her real homeland. The woman addresses her as if she never left the place and indeed as if her ancestors should have never left the place, for the story ends with her saying "You are home now" (153). This passage, taken in isolation, may lead to the conclusion that the minds of the characters in *No Great Mischief* are indeed anchored in the past, still colonized and subjected to the influence of Scotland: here, Scotland is read as the real home, the only place in

which the construction of identity can be ultimately completed, through a physical return.

Scotland is present in the lives of Alexander MacDonald and his family not only in terms of personal narratives, language and other cultural elements, but also through the reconstruction and adaptation of history. *No Great Mischief* actively engages with the questioning of historical past and its repercussions on the present time of its characters. In different passages of the novel, the narrator explores historical events from both Scotland and Canada, and he does so mainly through the figures of his two grandfathers. The personalities of these characters are almost antagonistic: Alexander's maternal grandfather, referred to merely as "Grandfather", is a sober, sensible man, described as "exceedingly careful" (30), meticulous, concerned with pulchritude and neatness. "'He is so clean, he makes you nervous,' said my other grandfather, who, while he had a great affection for him, was a very different kind of man" (31). Indeed, Alexander's grandfather on his father's side, whom he, in contrast, addresses as "Grandpa", could be described as a carefree, jovial man, fond of drinking and music. The differences in their characters are further reinforced by the ironic, somewhat humorous circumstances of the moments they pass away:

> Grandpa died from jumping up in the air and trying to click his heels together twice. [...] He leapt up into the air and then collapsed for the last time on his floor. [...] Grandfather died reading a book called *A History of the Scottish Highlands*. His finger marked the page and the book flipped closed around his finger and his glasses slipped down on his nose. (245)

The lives of these two men are described to have come to a sudden halt while engaged in activities that iconically represented their lifestyles.

It is Grandfather who is more aware of the different versions that history may provide, and who throughout the novel is troubled by the conciliation of both. He often revisits and reflects upon passages of history concerning their ancestors in Scotland. At a point in the novel, he discusses with Grandpa the different perceptions or interpretations that could be given to the battle of Killiekrankie. At times, he imagines the members of clan MacDonald returning from the battle "in the splendour of the autumn sun [...] Coming with their broadswords and their claymores [...] Singing the choruses of their rousing songs" (83, 84). This version, which pleases Grandpa, clashes with the more pessimistic view of the Highlanders coming back from these battles, not boastful and triumphant, but "thinking of the dead they left behind. [...] carrying home their wounded [...] saying 'Well, this better be worth it. Somehow'" (84, 85); and he continues, much to the annoyance of Grandpa: "'When I think of them in this way [...] the sun does not shine in the fall on Rannoch Moor, but instead it is raining" (85). These are two conflictive notions

of the elusive part of history: the unrecorded personal experiences of the people who lived those events.

Grandfather discloses the meaning of the novel's title. During the assault of Quebec, commanded by General Wolfe in 1759, it was apparently thanks to the intervention of a MacDonald, who tricked one of the French sentries, that the British Army could ascend the cliffs in the Plains of Abraham, led by the Highland soldiers. In Grandpa's mind "they were first because they were the best [...] I think of them as winning Canada for *us*. They learned that at Culloden" (101). Grandfather deconstructs this idealized and sentimentalized vision Grandpa has, by complicating the 'facts' for him and adding that "at Culloden they were on the *other side*. [...] MacDonald fought *against* Wolfe. Then he went to Paris. That's where he learned his French" (101). Indeed, Wolfe had fought against the Highlanders in 1747 in Culloden, after which many of them had to flee to France, because they were considered rebellious traitors. Following that episode, the British Army offered them the chance to fight for Britain against the French in North America.[3] General Wolfe appears to have been suspicious of the Highlanders and he wrote in a letter that he had used them because "they are hardy, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country, and no great mischief if they fall" (219).

The dialogue that stems from the two grandfathers' often opposing notions of the same historical event constitutes an example of the denaturalization of history. Historical knowledge cannot be considered as absolute; the 'truths' behind it are subject to interpretation; its multiple dimensions cannot be wholly grasped. The experience of history is often unrecorded, and the meaning it acquires depends on the subjective position of those who do the writing and those who, later on, do the interpretation, whatever the reasons they have to do so. Grandfather's life has been marked by loss: he never knew his father, he lost his wife during childbirth and later, lost his daughter (Alexander's mother) in the accident in the ice. MacLeod explains that he is trying to fill the void left by these absences through the study of history: "as a result of the circumstances of his birth, he grows up a rather serious man who constantly pursues the question, 'Where did I come from?' and this eventually leads him to ask the related question, 'Where did we all come from?' So he starts to study and explore his Highland past" (Baer 2005). For Grandpa, who has not suffered the same tribulations, history has a different meaning: he chooses to rely on those portions of it which praise the bravery of his ancestors. The fact that history lacks the unity it has been traditionally empowered to opens up multiple possible readings, which enables the protagonists of this novel to reconstruct the notion of Scotland and its past in ways that fit into their present. Challenging

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[3] See Baer (2005).

traditional conceptions of history as the recipient of truth and accentuating its man-made nature is one way in which Canadian literature detaches itself from the aforementioned inherited, Eurocentric values and models.

There is clearly a vast amount of material related to Scotland in the novel. However, I would argue that although Scotland can be read as a homeland at certain levels, another geographical location emerges which is of equal, if not more, importance to the characters: Cape Breton. If diasporans are understood to be "strangers from elsewhere who, without a sense of belonging, never feel at home in a new country yet unable to return to their homeland" (Benzi Zhang 2000:126), two conflictive points arise that impede the interpretation of this novel as an example of Scottish diaspora writing. On the one hand, the protagonist's generation is enabled to physically return to the homeland. As shown in the previous passage, it is no longer impossible to effect this longed for return; travelling to the homeland has become a commodity, due to economic advantages and technological developments, which implies a shift from a discourse of exile to what is called "roots tourism."[4]

On the other hand, as I now proceed to discuss, it cannot be said that these characters do not belong in Canada. Cape Breton is their home and they certainly do not feel like strangers there. At different points in the novel, it becomes clear that Cape Breton is the homeland this family need to return to when they are absent from it. There is a passage in which Alexander, together with both his grandfathers and his grandmother are going back to Cape Breton after his graduation day in Halifax. MacLeod writes: "When the front wheels of the car touched Cape Breton, Grandpa said, 'Thank Christ to be home again. Nothing bad can happen to us now'" (108). The island is thus imagined as a haven of safety, as a shelter from any danger and the place where they really have a sense of belonging. It is constructed in the same terms as the imaginary homelands diasporans cannot have access to. Another way in which this is reflected is when the protagonist is removed from the comfortable milieu of Cape Breton and taken to work in the mines in Ontario with his brothers. Here, Alexander and the other members of his family are surrounded by migrants, or descendants of migrants from other countries. Their reaction is, then, not to mingle with the diverse cultural and ethnic groups, but to stay together in a close circle: "When we talked, often in Gaelic, it was mostly of the past and the distant landscape which was our home" (135). "Our home" here refers to Cape Breton: it is the island which stirs in them the feeling of nostalgia which a real home often provokes. The idea that the homeland has been relocated to Cape Breton for the community portrayed in this novel is further reinforced by the last passage of

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[4] See Basu (2007).

the story. In this episode Calum, Alexander's brother, is suffering in destitution in the slums of Toronto and, finding himself on the verge of death, he calls his brother to take him to the island. He says to Alexander: "You can do the driving now. We're almost home" (260), and, taking the passenger seat, he seems to let himself die the moment they arrive in Cape Breton. Thus, Calum, the man who through the novel has come to stand for the figure of the first Calum Ruadh, chooses Cape Breton as the place for his death, the ultimate cycle completion.

From the analysis of these excerpts it can be concluded that there are two locations in the novel that may function as homelands, even though they do so in different terms. In order for a Scottish diaspora to exist, Scotland needs to be recognized as one of these imaginary homelands. Cape Breton cannot stand on its own as the place in which these communities really belong, since it is in fact their native land and there would be no displacement to deal with in the first place. In this context of migration and nostalgia, issues such as class need to be taken into consideration, since they may alter the perspective from which emotional and physical returns are carried out. However, technological and media developments have transformed the relationships between diasporans and their homelands, and the Scottish diaspora is not an isolated case. Where many discourses of loss and migration were articulated around the impossibility of a return, those physical obstacles are currently exerting less pressure, although this impossibility is still of course a reality for many migrants (especially refugees or political exiles and, again, class is an issue to be closely observed when dealing with this supposed freedom of mobility). It is necessary therefore to articulate the Scottish diaspora in such terms that it is able to accommodate the different sets of loyalties towards the two locations; it needs also to be redefined so that these recent shifts in the accessibility of the ancestral land of origins are included. *No Great Mischief* represents this ambivalence, constantly negotiating both spaces and their mutual influences. Cape Breton preserves parts of the Scottish culture in such a way that it seems sometimes impossible to separate both lands. However, it is the loss of the traditions and the values of Cape Breton which this novel is denouncing and mourning. MacLeod is recording a part of Cape Breton (and not of Scotland) that is beginning to disappear at the turn of the century. Scotland is acknowledged in this novel as the place of origin of, not only these families, but their whole culture and traditions. Their language, music and even their life structure are profoundly affected and, as reflected in the novel, intimately related and indebted to the Scottish culture and values. It does so, however, in such a way that Cape Breton does not lose its centrality, allowing its culture and the identity of its inhabitants to be independent and coherent entities, and not mere reproductions of its Scottish preceding counterpart.

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