

GENERATIONS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD'S *TIMESCAPE*

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Abstract

In 1790, Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated from Scotland to Canada, where they settled in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Born in 1936, MacLeod died in 2014. Although he is not an autobiographical writer, his centuries-long family history is fundamental to his writing, families and generations being for him the natural configuration of human existence. In turn, generations inscribe themselves in the history of the countries they live in. In his short stories and one novel, MacLeod succeeds in problematizing both heritage and generational conflict. Emblematically, in the novel *No Great Mischief*, the narrator, while walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: "Living in the past is not living up to our potential".

Generazioni ed eredità culturale nel timescape di Alistair MacLeod

Nel 1790 gli antenati di Alistair MacLeod (1936-2014) emigrarono dalla Scozia in Canada, per stabilirsi permanentemente a Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. Non è uno scrittore autobiografico, ma la storia secolare della sua famiglia è fondamentale alla sua scrittura, perché famiglia e generazioni sono per lui la configurazione naturale dell'esistenza umana. A loro volta le generazioni si iscrivono nella storia dei paesi dove vivono. Nei suoi racconti e nel suo unico romanzo, MacLeod problematizza eredità culturale e conflitto generazionale. Nel romanzo, *No Great Mischief*, il narratore, mentre cammina in un'affollata strada di Toronto, è spinto a meditare da una frase emblematica che legge sulla t-shirt di una ragazza: "Vivere nel passato è non vivere appieno le nostre potenzialità".

From Skye to Cape Breton

Immigration from Scotland to Canada had its beginning as far as 1622 under the reign of James VI of Scotland (James I of England), with the founding and naming of the colony of Nova Scotia in the Gulf of St. Lawrence¹. Scottish im-

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¹ The Gulf, which is more an internal sea than a gulf, was named by the French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534. Also the name Canada, meaning roughly 'abode', 'home', is believed to be due to Cartier.

Oltreoceano. L'identità canadese tra migrazioni, memorie e generazioni, a cura di Silvana Serafin, Alessandra Ferraro e Daniela Ciani Forza, 11 (2016).

migration increased when many Highlanders fled Scotland after the failure of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite risings, the ensuing defeat at Culloden in 1746, and the death of Bonnie Prince Charlie, Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, in 1788. Today Scottish Canadians are distributed all over the country and are one of Canada's largest and more influential ethnic groups². Alistair MacLeod's ancestors migrated to Nova Scotia from the isle of Eigg, one of Scotland's Inner Hebrides, in 1790, settling in the island of Cape Breton. He was born in North Battleford, in Saskatchewan, in 1936³, where his parents had temporarily migrated. After other migrations from migration, first to Edmonton and later to Mercoal, Alberta, where the father worked in a coal mine, in 1946 the family went back to Cape Breton. This is the deep eidetic timescape⁴ Alistair MacLeod elects to deal with in his less than twenty short stories⁵ and in his novel *No Great Mischief* (2000). Although he may be easily misinterpreted as such, he is not an autobiographical writer; instead, he makes cultural history and his family history, his mine, using its ore to build the foundations of stories and characters belonging to our time.

The geographical and historical choreography of his fictional families and their patterns are fundamental to his vision of human progress through time because to him families, generations and their ties are the natural configuration of the very existence of the human race. In turn, generations inscribe themselves into the systemic structure of the country of which they are citizens. In every single one of his short stories and, with more emphasis on historical facts, in his one novel, MacLeod problematizes the often-conflicting issues of tradition and progress, heritage and contemporary realities, education and lack of it, parental and extended family relationships and bonds, including in-laws. Although contexts and agonists may seem to be reiterated, they are in fact varied presenting what could be almost called a range of case studies on and of family configurations. None of his characters seem to find optimal solutions to the conflicts they live through, because, ruthlessly and feelingly at the same time – quite an achievement on MacLeod's part –, the stories show that what is good for one person or community is bad for another. Nonetheless his characters cannot help making choices. MacLeod does not add judgements or even

² Scottish Canadians have registered tartans varying from province to province, or territory.

³ Alistair MacLeod died April, 20, 2014 in Windsor, Ontario, where he lived and taught English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

⁴ 'Timescape' was first used by the astrophysicist and novelist Gregory Benford, notably in his novel *Timescape* (1980). 'Timescape' has affinities with but is not Bachtin's 'chronotope'.

⁵ Sixteen of his short stories are collected in *Island - Collected Stories* (2001). Two are published separately in periodicals, while some are still unpublished and some unfinished.

opinions to representation, but often makes his characters debate those issues within themselves – in *No Great Mischief* between a brother and a sister who are twins.

The boat and the book

In MacLeod's writings, education and/or the lack of it are paramount factors in determining not so much the characters' choices but rather working as antagonists in the shaping of their lives. When some of the characters exit the enclosure of their clan – indeed it could be called a stage – they do it at a cost. The following pages will necessarily confine themselves to some, yet exemplary, of his short stories. In "The Boat" (1968), MacLeod's first published short story, the first person narrator, recalling his and his family's past, is a young academic, whose dead father was a fisherman, owner of his boat, in Cape Breton Island. Here the conflict over education versus fishing as a means of earning a living involves father, mother and son – with six sisters in the background. When he was not in the boat, the narrator's father spent most of his time reading in a room of his own, where he accumulated magazines and books, many of them novels⁶. The mother, beautiful in a severe fashion, strong and not illiterate, believes only in physical work, in homestead self-sufficiency and in maintaining the *status quo* of her family in the local community. She disapproves of her daughters' marriages because none married a fisherman but young men from outside and went with them to live in towns; and she bitterly, relentlessly resents her only son's desertion of his father's fishing 'profession' to go to university and make a 'profession' of reading books. He, the son, reflects that:

[She] had not read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time. [...] At times, although she was not overly religious, she would bring in God to bolster her argument, saying, 'In the next world God will see to those who waste their lives reading useless books when they should be about their work'⁷ (MacLeod. *Collected Stories*: 8).

⁶ The father's room cannot but recall Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, giving the theme an additional perspective.

⁷ The narrator's mother attitude shows a curious analogy with that of Stephen Dedalus' mother in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, when, at the beginning of Chapter 5, she tells her son: «you'll live to rue the day you set your foot in that place» – «that place» being the university (179).

Yet MacLeod makes it very clear that the young academic admires her mother, making him repeatedly add details to a portrait of her that borders on aestheticization, the semiconscious nature of which is part of the character of the young professor of English Literature, who describes her as «tall and dark and powerfully energetic» and for years «a local beauty», slightly disturbingly also telling the implied readers that she reminded him of Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye⁸, quickly adding «in a physical way» (5). She is beautiful in an almost Pre-raphaelite-like way⁹ even when he recalls that:

She fed and clothed a family of seven children, making all of the meals and most of the clothes. She grew miraculous gardens and magnificent flowers and raised broods of hens and ducks. She would walk miles on berry-picking expeditions and hoist her skirts to dig for clams when the tide was low (5).

His ties with his father are just as complex and mature slowly. One night, during a summer spent home trawling with him in «the boat», while they were talking about *David Copperfield* in his room, his father told him he had always wanted to go to university. Later, the narrator, by then an academic, thinking in retrospect about that personal confession, remembers how that summer he realized the existence of a new bond between him and his father, based on their common love for literature, and how he was simultaneously struck by the privilege of going to school he had been given and the life of forced endurance his father had to go through:

And then there came into my heart a very great love for my father and I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. [...]. And I knew then that I could never live him alone I felt that I had been very small in a little secret place within me and that even the completion of high school was for me a silly shallow selfish dream (21).

Nonetheless, when he remembers that momentous summer and the death of his father the following autumn, he lives in a town and teaches at university. The treatment of time in the story may at times seem difficult because of the interplay of flashbacks with reflective moments of the fictional present, but it is, in fact, very precise and consistent with MacLeod's representation of the

⁸ Eustacia Vye is a very complex and controversial character in Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878).

⁹ The Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) offers interesting examples of tall, dark, beautiful women.

layered feelings of the narrator. In his present, the young academic has to face both old and new conflicting bonds and rifts: his father's confession makes him feel he would have approved his choice, yet he also senses a bitter remorse thinking of his life and death, and thinking of the «lobster beds off the Cape Breton», «grounds» the community and his mother consider «sacred» and waiting for him (24). Centuries of culture make his literary present fight with his family heritage: fathers had always been fishermen, mothers had reared children and took care of the whole household tasks, sons and daughters should follow in parents' footsteps. It is part of the character, decidedly a round character, his thinking of his mother always through a sequence of images, making her a severe, tragic and yet aestheticized epitome of his betrayal of their community culture:

It is not an easy thing to know that your mother lives alone on an inadequate insurance policy and that she is too proud to accept any other aid. [...]. And that she lies awake in the early morning's darkness when the rubber boots of the men crunch upon the gravel as they pass beside her house [...] and she alone [...] has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea. And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue (24-25).

The fog

The choreography of family members changes in another short story, “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” (1974): a ten-years old grandson is being brought up by maternal grandparents in a small fishing village in Newfoundland, not far from Cape Spear¹⁰; his mother and official father are absent from the scene because they died in a car accident; his natural father arrives in the village summoned through a sense of duty by the grandfather, while the boy does not know the stranger is his father, and the father has never seen the boy before and did not even know he had a son. Like in “The Boat”, the narrator in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” is a young and clearly successful academic, but this time the point of view is that of a father not that of a son¹¹. The narration, fictionally lasting no more than twenty-four hours, is scrupulously maintained within his knowledge and perceptions.

¹⁰ Cape Spear is the easternmost point of Atlantic Canada, dramatically beautiful and awe-inspiring – a good example of the picturesque sublime.

¹¹ There is not the least sign of the young academic in “The Boat” being the same person of the academic in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”.

His arrival at the village, literally at the end of the road from the nearest town, driving a «small rented Wolkswagen», is a highly pictorial and emotional homage to the stunning beauty of the landscape and at the same time a proleptic intimation of a perduring cultural heritage: «Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. [...] Even farther out, somewhere beyond Cape Spear lies Dublin and the Irish coast; far away but still the nearest land, and closer now than is Toronto or Detroit [...]» (118-119). It is protracted for more than two pages and does not end abruptly but lingers on almost to the end of the narrative, intermingled with the characters' motions and dialogues.

In the middle of that three-dimensional scenery, the narrator meets his son, John, serenely unaware that the stranger is his father, and, soon after, is invited by the boy's grandfather to stay for the night. Through the natural and anthropological landscapes, the characters features and clothes, and a number of knowledgeably selected tell-tale objects, the story is a representation of the traditional life of fishermen and their family in an epitomic village, which is made by MacLeod to appear as an outpost of Gaelic Ireland in a Canadian contemporary context. The family in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is Irish and Catholic and, not unexpectedly, very similar to the Scottish family¹² in "The Boat". After supper, during which John does most of the talking, and after some family playing and singing a couple of old traditional songs, ingeniously chosen by MacLeod to be read as connected with the story, the narrator and the grandfather are alone, playing chess, drinking hot rum toddies and talking. It is at this point that the artefacts are grafted into the present situation, so that past and present are told in two parallel tracks, a not chronological one for the past, a chronological one for the present.

The grandfather starts his part of the story in *media re*:

When she married in Toronto [...] we figured that maybe John should be with her and with her husband. That maybe he would be having more of a chance there in the city. [...] Well, what was wrong was that we missed him wonderful awful. [...] Anyway, they could have no more peace with John than we could without him. [...] They sent word that he was coming on the plane [...]. Well, it was all wrong the night before [...]. The signs all bad [...] (134-135).

A list, a compendium of centuries-old superstitious beliefs follows – the omens and the human beings immersed together in a flood of fog, which is to

¹² During our private conversations (I was translating some of his short stories), MacLeod frequently underlined the similarities between Scotland and Ulster – and his interest in both.

the grandparents the most frightening of all bad omens. Yet, the aircraft transporting John lands safely through the fog, but the car accident where John's mother and her husband die takes place that night in the far away fog of Toronto: «That night they be killed» (135).

The narrator's part of the story spills over in his thoughts later, when he is alone in the room where he will spend the night, which is near the room where he fathered John and where the boy now sleeps. Literary images cram his mind intertwined with images of the local imported popular culture, the culture he investigated as a student, in particular the girlish belief that helped him to seduce his host's daughter. The quotation, though shortened, is long but worthwhile:

The room is full of sound. Like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window [...]. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in. [...] there is no boiled egg or shaker of salt or glass of water waiting on the chair within this closed room's darkness. Once, though, there was a belief held in the outports, that if a girl would see her own true lover she should boil an egg and scoop out half the shell and fill it with salt. Then she should take it to bed with her and eat it, leaving a glass of water by her bedside. In the night her future husband or a vision of him would appear and offer her the glass. [...] It is the type of belief that bright young graduate students were collecting eleven years ago for the theses and archives of North America and also, they hoped, for their own fame (137-138).

MacLeod endows his young scholar's thoughts with a touch of irony¹³, but chooses to stop short of making him a courageous and profound thinker. The key-word, and therefore the key image of the story is «fog», the fog without duplicating itself in the fog within: «I would like to see my way more clearly. I, who have never understood the mystery of fog» (138).

The boy and his grandparents are unaware that they live a life that is 'heritage' and 'folklore' to scholars and archives, they do not know the word 'picturesque'. The successful academic knows all that, and knows that the disappearance of cultural heritage is something to be fought against. Yet, how can this be done? Who does preserve the cultural heritage better, the scholar through his work or the illiterate grandparents who still live their 'heritage', or, may be, John will? John, of whom his grandfather says: «John here has the makings of a good fisherman» (128); and about whom his father asks himself: «And perhaps now I should go and say, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout [...]. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my col-

¹³ MacLeod's allusion to the protagonists of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is perhaps too evident to be pointed out.

lecting and most successful life?» (139). He does not tell John he is his father and leaves him with the grandparents, leaving to the reader the interpretation of the title: John, the «gift of blood», is a gift from a father to the lonely grandparents, or rather a gift refused? Or is the fathering of the boy ironically called a gift? Or the scholar wants to preserve the harmony and beauty of the village and its inhabitants, almost as a gift to a living, necessarily impermanent archive? Besides, there is another gift, briefly mentioned: the boy gives his unknown father «a smooth round stone [...] worn and polished» by sea and sand to «near perfection», and says «I like to collect them» (140). Does he, like his father, have «the makings» of a good collector of knowledge of the past? MacLeod's titles are always difficult and layered. Once more, the quotation of the entire passage would be too long. Suffice to point out again that MacLeod's characters make choices, but, as anticipated, do not find pacifying solutions. It would be easy to read the father and the grandparents in the story as instances of selfishness in different degrees of consciousness, but MacLeod makes things much more complex and ends the story with far more questions than answers.

Song and silence

The family pattern changes again, and utterly, in “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984). The central character, Archibald, is a seventy-eight years old ‘lumberer’, faultlessly respectful of the beauty of the woods, «a tall, slim man with dark hair and brown eyes and his own teeth» (271), whose ancestors had come to Nova Scotia from the Isle of Skye four generations before. At the beginning of the short story he has been a widower for forty-nine years; his wife died giving birth to a son, their fourth child, who died with her. After that, their three daughters had been brought up by his wife's sisters, within an enlarged family. Now, in the year 1980, he lives alone high up on a Cape Breton Island mountain in a log house he himself had built to near perfection and where he has a superb, pictorial view of the valley below, the sea, Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands.

The generational conflict involves the entire family, particularly the younger members of it, but becomes especially alive when it extends itself out of the family clan to include a «gang» of young men belonging to other families. The story is narrated in the third person, by a very subtle narrator who mostly (not always) limits his knowledge to Archibald's life and thoughts, oscillating from inside and outside elements. The text of the short story is crammed with meaning, all the words and information are pondered to contribute to the whole, every word counts. Archibald, who clearly received a secondary school educa-

tion, still speaks Gaelic, knows by heart a large number of traditional songs and ballads and is an extremely good singer. He is well known to researchers in the field and is frequently asked for contributions:

Many of the letters [...] came from the folklorists who had 'discovered' him in the 1960s and for whom he had made various tapes and recordings. And he had come to be regarded as 'the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers'. He was faithfully recorded in the archives at Sydney and Halifax and Ottawa [...]. He did not mind the folklorists, enunciating the words [...] explaining that 'bh' was pronounced as 'v' (like the 'ph' in phone is pronounced 'f', he would say), expanding on the more archaic meaning and footnoting himself the words and phrases of local origin (280).

When he and his family receive an invitation to sing traditional Gaelic songs in Halifax, at a Festival connected with «the year of 'Scots Around the World'» (184), while his relatives, especially those in their twenties or thirties, seem more excited by the prospect of spending a week in Halifax than interested in singing, he reacts with a mixture of warm feelings and philological passion, although the word philology is obviously unknown to him. The organisers interview other groups of singers, but Archibald's family is the one they prefer, mainly because of Archibald's leading skill and exceptionally good voice and enunciation. Yet, when they are singing and Archibald is asked to cut the song before it ends, he becomes very upset: «It's not finished [...]. It's a narrative». The producer says that there is no problem, since nobody knows the language and they are «just trying to gauge audience impact» (298). But, the austere and passionate philologist in Archibald strives toward perfection and cannot compromise. To his family's chagrin, since he cannot accept the songs to be cut in the middle, he declines the invitation to sing in Halifax. Another group will sing in their place, the 'gang' of those reckless young men always ready to pick up a good 'fight', far less good and respectful of heritage and authenticity, but a group who can accept to cut a song because they do not know the meaning of the words they sing. Archibald, in the end, envies and admires them for their «closeness [...] fierceness [...] tremendous energy» (309), thinking that perhaps «men like them» (309) fought in the «storm past» (309) of Scotland. Archibald prefers silence.

Timescape and irreversibility

Several others of MacLeod's short stories would be interesting too, especially considering that they cover a gamut of family structures. No less interesting would be the novel, *No Great Mischief*, where the case studies coalesce into the history of the generations of one family, from Culloden to contemporary To-

ronto, via Cape Breton. Almost at the beginning of the novel, the narrator, Alexander MacDonald walking through a busy thoroughfare in Toronto, is made meditative, and partly upset, by a sentence he reads on the front of a girl's t-shirt: «Living in the past is not living up to our potential» (56).

MacLeod's concept of time is linear and its movement unidirectional; it could aptly be described by Arthur Eddington's 'Arrow of time'¹⁴: the past can be remembered, preserved, studied, imitated, acted and enacted, obeyed in its commands, endured in its consequences, expiated, and much more, but it cannot be 'the present' a second time – its unidirectional movement is irreversible. In his timescape, paradoxically, the two academics and the folklorists of the three short stories here privileged¹⁵ do more to preserve the past than the mother in "The Boat", John and his grandparents in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" – though the natural father's choice makes the situation multi-layered – and Archibald in "The Tuning of Perfection".

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¹⁴ Arthur Eddington (1882-1944) was an English astrophysicist and literary writer. He developed the concept of the 'Arrow of time' or 'Asymmetry of time' in 1927.

¹⁵ At least "Island" (1988) and "Clearances" (1999) must be mentioned, because the choice of the protagonists of both stories, albeit for very different reasons, is, like Archibald's, silence.