

The Highland Heart Still Beats:  
Cape Breton Cultural Identity in the Fiction of  
Alistair MacLeod, Sheldon Currie, and Lynn Coady

by

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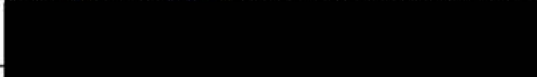
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ABSTRACT


This thesis examines the construction of a “Scottish Folk” identity in Cape Breton, first developed by the Nova Scotia government in the 1930s to strengthen the tourism industry. I read fiction by Alistair MacLeod, Sheldon Currie, and Lynn Coady, as well as the film *Margaret’s Museum*, for their reaction to this simplified representation of Cape Breton culture, and explore how they articulate an alternative vision of Cape Breton identity. Alistair MacLeod and Sheldon Currie employ postcolonial strategies of resistance common to “settler” writing; they detail the unique history and community of Cape Breton’s Highland Scottish immigrants in an attempt to preserve their culture from global, commercial influences. Lynn Coady pushes the boundaries of postcolonialism as she depicts a Cape Breton community that accepts other cultural influences as inevitable; she uses humour to undermine stereotypes, and she insists on celebrating the absurdities of contemporary life.

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## Introduction

Cape Breton was one of the first settled places in Canada, and is one of the oldest seats of Canadian culture. Little critical work has been done on Cape Breton literature, yet contemporary writing from Cape Breton exemplifies some of the most relevant issues in literary scholarship today. This study of work by Alistair MacLeod, Sheldon Currie, and Lynn Coady examine the construction and articulation of a local cultural identity in the midst of North American mass culture, how a cultural group responds to state-sanctioned stereotyped images of itself, and how useful postcolonial theory is for exploring Cape Breton's unique place in the "Second-World." In a review of Alistair MacLeod's short story collection, As Birds Bring Forth the Sun, Janice Kulyk Keefer wrote that MacLeod seemed committed to "a region which is not so much geographical as imaginative and racial—everything that is conjured up by the term Gaelic" (113). Keefer's comment is unfortunately typical of the national idea of Cape Breton as inhabited by Scottish Folk: images of fiddlers, lighthouses, fishermen and perhaps striking coal miners, the Gaelic language, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, tightly-knit, musical families and tremendous natural beauty prevail to this day. How does it come to be that these images are so comfortably representative of Cape Breton, and how do local contemporary writers respond?

The concept of a 'cultural identity' is problematic and difficult to define. Cultural Studies and other disciplines try to bridge the gap between cultural products—the end results of a cultural identity—and the process of their production by studying political circumstances, economic history, and other relevant social information. But what creates a culture in the first place? How do we draw boundaries around a group we can term a "people" that can be studied as a community? Benedict Anderson's work, Imagined Communities is helpful: he

writes that communities developed around particular commonalities, such as religious beliefs or rituals, that enabled a sense of connection between strangers regardless of their many individual differences, and led eventually to the growth of nations and nationalism. People began to imagine that they were part of a “deep, horizontal comradeship.” (7) This imagining was encouraged by those who ruled the community; images were provided that fostered a sense of nation, which ultimately has, in turn, become important at the individual level of identity. Throughout this essay I use the terms “identity” and “cultural identity” to represent the ideas, shared by many, of what constitutes their community, regardless of inherent individual differences. The terms also entail the images associated with those who share these ideas of themselves. I am concerned with two levels of “cultural identity:” first the sense of identity held by those in residence in Cape Breton, or those who hold themselves to be “Cape Bretoners” despite residence elsewhere; second, the images and ideas of Cape Breton projected onto these residents by those, nationally and internationally, who have no immediate association with the Island. I am primarily interested in the way that major contemporary authors from Cape Breton articulate that identity today.

I commonly refer to the “ethnic” communities on Cape Breton Island. This term has been hotly debated, and has fallen out of use; Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond in their classic work on Canadian multiculturalism, Other Solitudes, were deliberate in their avoidance of the term, because of its roots and connotations.

The first strand—from the Greek root *ethnos*, meaning ‘nation’ or ‘people’—should suggest that *all* Canadians are ethnic, including French and British; the fact that the word is *not* so used points to a hierarchy of social and cultural privilege that this collection wants to challenge. ... the word ‘ethnic’ always has to do with the social

positioning of the ‘other,’ and thus is never free of relations of power and value... (2)

Hutcheon and Richmond’s reasons for avoiding the term are precisely my reasons for using it. An “ethnic” identity is that part of a personal or group identity defined by shared racial, national, tribal, or linguistic origin or background—aspects determined at one’s birth that cannot be altered. All Canadians are ‘ethnic,’ and using the term only to describe those of minority cultures doesn’t strike me as useful, and one of my major goals in this thesis is to try to debunk the idea that the ‘dominant’ culture in Canada, generally seen as ‘white,’ is more homogenous than ‘Asian’ or ‘Black’ cultures, which contain numerous ‘ethnicities’ within those overly general categories. More specific stereotypes, like ‘Celtic,’ also smooth over differences (between English, Irish, Northern Irish, Scottish, Welsh, etc) that have been extremely important. By using the term ‘ethnic’ to describe these much more specific categories I hope to avoid privileging one culture over another, and be able to explore those “relations of power and value.”

Post-colonial studies have become a broad umbrella for dozens of variations on the question of cultural identity. In the postcolonial model, nationalism in general becomes “Empire,” and the imposition of Imperial rule changes the definitions of culture. Among the most complex effects of colonialism was the creation of communities that don’t fit the simple profile of ‘colonizer-colonized;’ those Homi Bhabha has outlined, including the ‘hybrid.’ Alan Lawson and Stephen Slemon have come to call another of these groups the “Second-World,” those developed nations (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and to some, the United States) that were long-term colonies with a great number of European settlers, and who were perhaps the most successful at displacing their Aboriginal peoples. The European-descended community is unquestionably in charge, and in fact a new nation has

been created with its own ‘national identity.’ In Canada this creates many complex relationships for post-colonial study.

Stephen Slemon writes that the white literatures of Canada contain an “ambivalence of literary resistance,” that is difficult to untangle:

The Second-World writer...[has] always been complicit in colonialism’s territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even and those moments when they have promulgated their most strident...figures of post-colonial resistance. (38)

Despite this complicity, however, descendants of the Highland Scots—among Canada’s first settlers—often align themselves with oppressed minority groups, in particular with the indigenous peoples of other nations. The Highland Scots have been portrayed as an occupied, indigenous people themselves, forced during the Clearances in Scotland to become refugees, and seen in the new world as such, with all of the negative connotations then implied.

Religious differences (Highland Catholicism was historically at odds with the Lowland-Presbyterian alliance with the English-Anglican ruling class, and is one area that creates sympathy with Canadian Irish-Catholic communities) often added to their marginalization during the time of colonization.

In order to justify this image of a ‘colonized’ people and play down their role as colonizers, Highland Scots (in some ways through the state-created Scottish identity) have created a sense of themselves as having a special, primary relationship to Cape Breton Island. Alan Lawson describes this aspect of the “settler subject” as necessary to create a sense of indigenous authority in the New World:

The colonial explorer had to empty the land of prior signification—what is

already known cannot be discovered, what already had a name cannot be named. For the settler, too, the land had to be empty. Empty land can be settled, but occupied land can only be invaded. (24)

Though Highland Scots had been through this process of the ‘emptying’ of their own land by the English in Scotland, they in turn ‘emptied’ Cape Breton. There is almost no mention of cultures or communities that existed before or even during settlement in contemporary Cape Breton literature. To the contrary, Cape Breton is often described as having almost mystical significance to the Scottish settlers—a sense that they are in a privileged, personal, inherited relationship with Cape Breton land. In fact what happens is a clear-cut case of Terry Goldie’s ‘indigenization:’ “the replacement of the indigene with forms of white indigeneity” (Lawson 26). Despite the actual presence of thousands of indigenous people on eleven different reserves, Native peoples have no presence in the ‘imagined community’ of Cape Breton.

Lawson also points out that, at another level, settler literatures often challenge the dominant nationalism of the country in which they now find themselves. In Donna Bennett’s words, postcolonial theory can be used to “discuss a group of people *within* a country who have a sense of separate identity and cohesion” (167). Beyond trying to merely give voice to their small culture, they are also challenging the dominant Canadian national images that have left them little room. Cape Bretoners feel real pressure from “the globalizing tendency of the international politics, popular culture, and academic politics of the United States, or the more dispersed, moving target of multinational capital” (Lawson 28). Tourism has been a major part of Cape Breton’s economy for decades, and is one of the primary reasons for the state-constructed essentializing images; Cape Breton’s geographical location close to the American Eastern Seaboard creates a feeling of constraint from both Canada and the U.S.

Post-colonial theories of settler writing apply well to works by MacLeod and Currie, however, Lynn Coady seems to be writing with a very different perspective. As close examination shows, although she is helping to articulate a new vision of Cape Breton identity, she is not trying to give voice to an ethnic-based community. She is writing against homogenizing global influences, and she gives voice to the very particular and local, but that local is a (more accurate) blend of ethnic and non-ethnic based identities, and she recognizes that what makes Cape Breton today unique is not its separation from the postmodern, multidimensional world, but simply the way that it manifests in her small corner. Coady's writing is an example of what Lawrence Grossberg describes as a potentially new direction for postcolonial theory. He believes that as long as writers and theorists are exclusively focused on the binary of oppression and resistance, or on trying to vigilantly recognize every ethnic-based community (through concepts of diaspora or hybridity), postcolonial theory will stagnate and ultimately fail to become, in fact, *post*-colonial.

Grossberg suggests instead that a new perspective should transcend the 'colonial model' of the oppressor and the oppressed. His new model lets go of identity as primarily linked to race or history, as these are inherently artificial and do not move us beyond nationalist, adversarial politics. Grossberg asks, "what are the conditions through which people can belong to a common collective without becoming representatives of a single definition?" (Hall/Du Gay 88) He suggests that we remove identity from the notion of difference and place it instead at the level of belonging. One always belongs to many groups at once (class, gender, family, and race being merely the largest), but every group then inherently contains its differences only fluidly—it is understood that any one group is joined in that moment by only one aspect, and therefore, at the individual level, not *represented*

(103). Grossberg uses the example of activists at Tiananmen Square, who

came to embody a community of opposition...to the state machine itself. In fact, there is no common identity, no property that defines them apart from the fact that they were there, together in that place. It was the fact of belonging that constituted their belonging together. (104)

As chapter 3 illustrates, Coady's Cape Breton embodies precisely this type of communal identity.

Historian Ian McKay has written extensively on the construction of Nova Scotia's Scottish persona, particularly during the 1930s under Angus L. MacDonald's premiership of the province. Cape Breton has a rather unique history in Canada, which adds to its literature's complexity today. Likely first settled briefly by Vikings, it was certainly occupied by, among other tribes, the Mi'kmaq, when the concept of "New Scotland" was created in 1624. At that time, the Crown created an order of knight-baronetcies in Scotland, designated part of Edinburgh Castle "Nova Scotia," and some of the baronets took *sasine* possession of their lands (McKay notes that none of the baronets ever took physical possession of these lands ["Tartanism" 6]). By the early seventeenth-century, two tiny settlements were founded at Cape Breton and Port Royal in the Annapolis Valley. The Cape Breton settlement was ostensibly Scottish, but McKay cites that the "population may well have been chiefly English," and both of them lasted only briefly—the Cape Breton one only weeks, the Port Royal settlement until 1632, when it was surrendered to France. Cape Breton became known through the eighteenth-century as Ile Royale, the part of Acadia not ceded to Britain in 1713, when the rest of the territory became known again as Nova Scotia (and has remained since). The French military fort at Louisburg remained a site of battle between the French, English,

and Americans for many years, but in 1758 the island was finally ceded to the British. In 1784, though, Cape Breton became an independent colony and remained so until 1820, when it was ceded back to the rest of Nova Scotia. Throughout its independence Cape Breton experienced great immigration, particularly of Highland and other Scots, United Empire Loyalists, Irish, and the Acadian settlements on the western shore remained strong. This brief historical account points clearly to the fact that despite tourism-illusions to the contrary, Cape Breton as a political entity has no one inherent historical ethnic identity.

Though Nova Scotia and Cape Breton were unquestionably colonies, residents were split as to whether they thought of themselves as colonists or pioneers. The Highland Scots who had emigrated to the “New World” during the Clearances in particular felt as though they were leaving British (mainly Scottish) landlords, and did not consider themselves “ruled” in the same way that they had tangibly been in Scotland (see Kennedy). According to McKay, before the 1930s, “no single dominant vocabulary of “Nova Scotianness” was in general use” (“Tartanism” 9). The level of unified identity and cohesion of Scottish communities before the 1930s is questionable, especially given the high level of isolation of some communities in Cape Breton, and that the history and importance to the region of other ethnic groups (Acadians and United Empire Loyalists in particular) seems to have been generally accepted (see McKay on the popularity of “Evangeline” and on early tourism publicity).

Historian E.R. Forbes writes in his Maritime history, Challenging the Regional Stereotype, that “myths and stereotypes are not necessarily false;” they are usually some blend of truth and fiction, and that “they persist because they are useful” (7). During the first blush of Canadian nationalism after World War I, creating a provincial identity with an “ancient” heritage in Canada was very politically and economically useful. The mythology survives: as

recently as 1992, historian R.A. MacLean wrote that Highland immigrants to Cape Breton were able to retain their “tribal distinctiveness and adapt it to new conditions,” and finishes his first chapter with the statement: “Being a Nova Scotian of Scottish descent is not simply to live in Nova Scotia, it is a state of mind” (11). The success of the creation of that sense of kin and comradeship is articulated in MacLeod’s scattered narrators who, despite physically living all over the world, psychologically remain in Cape Breton most of the time. The construction of the image of the Cape Breton Folk—humble, rural, and passive—also coincided with many of the most intense labour battles in industrial Cape Breton history, and thus served both as a distraction and as a way to minimize the ideological divide between striking miners, their families and communities and the larger, more conservative middle and upper-class sections of Nova Scotia society.

As Canada began to develop its own icons and images of identity away from Britain, its bias toward Central Canada became clear. Forbes and McKay describe two strains of nationalist ideology in the 1930s and 40s: the first included images of the rocks of the Canadian shield, trading patterns and immigration patterns of the St. Lawrence, and the sense of the Ontario/Quebec based “Dominion of Canada.” The other set of images revolved around the North American idea of the Western Frontier: innovation and new life coming from the new settlements in the Wild West. In either set of images, the smaller Maritime provinces had little room. So provincial governments began to look for images that would represent their region that could then be easily inserted into the national profile. J. Murray Gibbon, director of propaganda for the CPR, began to put together national exhibitions and folklore celebrations around his favorite image of the ‘cultural mosaic,’ and the popularity of ethnic-based images and icons—the easily identifiable yet non-threatening children in Ukrainian or

Scottish dress performing folkdances and songs—grew. His “tourist extravaganzas” (Quest 58) attracted thousands across the country, and the idea of regional identities as ethnic-based also grew more common.

When Nova Scotia’s premier Angus MacDonald started to see tourism as an important economic opportunity for the province, he believed ethnic images would provide the most interesting set of attractions. Folklorists like the immensely popular Helen Creighton had brought the idea of the Nova Scotia as a haven for idyllic Folk communities and as repositories of valuable historical, British ancestral, knowledge to national attention. Creighton wrote several books, worked as a folklorist for the National Museum, and appeared on dozens of CBC television and radio shows and National Film Board movies. Her articles in *MacLean’s* and other national media soon helped to create the national perception of Nova Scotia as a romantic place of fishermen and craftspeople, of natural beauty and peaceful life—conveniently ignoring those like the Lunenburg or Glace Bay workers involved in violent strikes. A local and national celebrity, Creighton helped provide the ‘Folk’ aspect of premier MacDonald’s Scottish tourism push.

McKay did extensive research looking for Scottishness as a tourist attraction before modern times, and found only negatives or absence. In The Quest of the Folk, McKay notes that although many Scots populated the Island and kept traditional ways of life for many years, even by the early twentieth-century many strong handicraft traditions, such as the weaving of blankets and clothing “had virtually disappeared” (156). In the early 1930s, when MacDonald came to power, ethnicity and provincial identity had begun to be linked, especially in tourism publicity; however several “races,” including the “Micmac” were regularly highlighted in promotional materials. As the years went by, though, there were calls

to go beyond merely highlighting the history of the region's different groups and instead to emphasize what might be seen as "authentically Nova Scotian" ("Tartanism" 17). If Premier MacDonald was the example of that authenticity, Nova Scotia should have become seen as quite an ethnic mix—his mother was Acadian and his father half-Irish, half-Scottish. But the Scottish history and tradition caught MacDonald's imagination more than any other, and, under his leadership, the province's identity became synonymous with 'New Scotland.' Thanks to MacDonald, Nova Scotia gained Highlands National Park, the Lone Shieling, the Nova Scotia Tartan, a Gaelic college, a Scottish coat of arms and crest, and the bagpiper that still greets tourists as they enter the province from neighbouring New Brunswick. Provincially funded Highland Games and Celtic Festivals remain to this day.

For MacDonald, giving the province a Scottish identity was a gift of pride, strength of character and ancient nobility. Political circumstances of the day meant that the Scottish identity was perhaps less potentially contentious than English or French-Canadian, and throughout Canada there were established upper-class clubs that had Scottish names or identification—which enabled loose "British" ties, with a new world sensibility. MacDonald also saw the Scots clan system as a relatively egalitarian one that was well suited to his liberal humanist ideals. The Scottish identity, McKay points out, also allowed MacDonald to reframe issues of the day as 'natural' rather than as social issues that needed political action. The problem of out-migration, for instance, can be perceived as "an indictment of a political and economic system which does not allow Nova Scotians to prosper in their own province" ("Tartanism" 43). But with a Scottish framework of romantic exile, or an essential ethnic pull toward voyaging and adventure, out-migration becomes "one more chapter in the romantic Scottish conquest of the world" (43).

It is very important to note that McKay researched instances of protest to this new hegemony of Scottishness, believing that surely groups—even the English—would have felt excluded by the new emphasis. Surprisingly, it seems that either the ethnicity at the time was seen as so harmless that no one minded, or, as McKay suggests, the levels of intermarriage may have been such that many in Nova Scotia would have had some blood or marriage connection to the Scottish community. It seems the more the ethnic connection was validated, the more people looked for ways to embrace it. It was around the introduction of the Nova Scotia tartan that the only voices of protest were heard. The tartan, ironically, now seen to be so representative of Nova Scotia, was invented by an English immigrant from Crewe for a handicrafts fair. The government was enraptured by the idea of a provincial tartan, and wanted it adopted immediately. The voice of protest came from the Scots themselves. The Nova Scotia Association of Scottish Societies withdrew its recognition of the tartan, and the Antigonish Highland Society—the oldest in the province, disapproved thoroughly of the notion of a provincial tartan that anyone, “Scots or not” (Quest 212) could wear. They worried that the future in this direction was that “the tartan no longer signified anything about the Scottish traditions to which the society was attached,” and they worried about the implications of “full commodification” (212). Unfortunately, their voices were not heard loudly enough to interfere with the imaginations and vision of the government, and the tartan is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the province’s state-supported Scottish identity.

MacDonald’s firm belief in the importance of the tourist industry to the province’s economy meant that, under his leadership, the state expanded its role in “the official production of images” (Quest 33), which both increased the impact of those images, and led to cultural producers able to make a living by creating “marketable images of the Folk” (33).

Artists rallied around the tourist cause, which was in turn linked back to regional identity: tourism was “a cause meriting the support of every patriotic Nova Scotian” (34). The link between the image of the Folk which became of personal patriotic importance, Scottishness personally espoused by the premier and his government and which offered a united, proud identity and community for all residents is still evident today. For instance, the idea, related to MacDonald’s framing of out-migration as an inevitable part of Scottish history, that all Cape Bretoners long for home whenever they are scattered across North America for work has been espoused by MacDonald, Hugh MacLennan, and Alistair MacLeod. *The National Post*, in an article about MacLeod and No Great Mischief, recently ran the headline, “Story of humble Cape Breton folk among six contenders for \$172,000.”

According to McKay’s definitions, the stereotype of the Folk revolves around an anti-modernist ideal from the early twentieth-century’s period of industrialization. As in many other places, the ideal of the rural haven and the simple life associated with it grew proportionately according to the level of complexity experienced in modern, urban life. So the Folk images are of a rural people with no complex problems or challenges, in tune with the rhythms of nature and living in close relationship with the earth. The Folk are described as humble, happy in their simple life, and untouched by the moral corruption of modernity. They are often portrayed as possessing an earthy sexuality—close to that of the animals they spend their lives with. Sometimes they are described as also having special spiritual powers (despite the well-known deep roots of Cape Breton’s conservative church-based communities)—Creighton’s hugely popular collections of ghost stories, and the continuing links in MacLeod’s work to the rural Scots with ancient Gaelic supernatural gifts of the ‘second sight’ or highly developed intuitions are still testament to this.

McKay documents the state's involvement in the creation of the stereotypes of the Cape Breton Scottish Folk that remain prevalent today, and is dissatisfied with the way in which the myth has blurred the historical complexities of the region. He points to those excluded from the stereotype, and also shows how the Scots themselves have often been shortchanged. McKay ends his book, The Quest of the Folk, with the recognition that in Nova Scotia today the old perceptions and stereotypes are beginning to be satirized and contested. He writes, "the old way of seeing is now starting to fade: who will be able to articulate a new imagined community to take its place?" (310)

Alistair MacLeod, Sheldon Currie, and Lynn Coady are some of Cape Breton's best known writers at the national level. MacLeod's short stories have been highly praised and widely anthologized for decades, and though his national profile remained low for much of that time, the recent publicity push by MacLelland and Stewart around the publication of his long-awaited novel No Great Mischief (which won, among other recognition, the 2000 Trillium prize) also led to brisk sales of his collected short stories, Island, published in a matching volume the next year. Though far from the household name that MacLeod is becoming, Sheldon Currie is widely known across the country for his short story, and novel, "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum." Thanks to Wendy Lill, who transformed the novel into a Governor General's Award-winning stage play, and Mort Ransen, who based his hit movie *Margaret's Museum* on Currie's work, the love story of the poor miner's daughter Margaret MacNeil has reached more people in Canada than perhaps any other Cape Breton cultural product (save the music of the Rankin Family). Lynn Coady's name may not yet be well-known outside literary circles, but the young author has already published a novel, Strange Heaven (nominated for the 1998 Governor General's award and the Thomas Raddall Atlantic

Fiction Award), and an admired collection of short stories, Play the Monster Blind. She has been interviewed on CBC radio and continues to write extensively in non-fiction for national magazines like Saturday Night. Her eventual profile and influence seem assured, and her writing provides an enlightening contrast to the more established work of Alistair MacLeod and the specific national phenomenon that has been *Margaret's Museum*.

Read together against the backdrop of Cape Breton social history and statistics that illustrate the shortcomings of the constructed Cape Breton cultural identity, these works can help provide some sense of the new vision being articulated. Their new vision is not something with definite boundaries within contemporary Cape Breton or without, but tracing its evolution does untangle many larger questions raised by both cultural studies and post-colonial literary theory, and reading Coady's contemporary works in this context, in particular, points to what the future of these questions of identity might look like.

## Chapter 1: Alistair MacLeod and the Legend of the Noble Gael

Though he has voiced discomfort with being perceived as “the voice of Cape Breton,” (Fortier 40), Alistair MacLeod is the most critically acclaimed writer to write about the Island in the latter part of the twentieth century, and his characters have become synonymous with Island residents of Highland Scottish descent. MacLeod’s writing career stretches back to 1968, when his first short story “The Boat” was published to much critical attention. Since then he has published two collections of stories, The Lost Salt Gift of Blood (1976) and As Birds Bring Forth the Sun (1986), as well as his recent novel, No Great Mischief (1999), which brought him fully into the national spotlight and continues to garner awards. I will be analyzing three key stories chronologically, then focussing on the novel; MacLeod spent a thirteen years writing No Great Mischief, and it is a culmination of many themes raised throughout his short stories. I have chosen stories that have received critical attention, that are spaced across the collections, and that deal fairly specifically with the question of Cape Breton identity. “The Boat” (1968) is MacLeod’s first published story, and though mainly focussed on family ties, it does connect those ties to a larger community identity through Gaelic culture. “The Closing Down of Summer” (1976) closes The Lost Salt Gift of Blood; it is a powerful story about the iconic Cape Breton miner (who appears again in No Great Mischief) and creates an intense dichotomy between traditional Gaelic culture rediscovered by a younger generation and the constructed, commodified Scottish culture of the provincial government—in full swing in the mid-70s. “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984) is a story from MacLeod’s second collection that illustrates the evolution of “tartanism,” and the widening gap between the cultural identity preserved by a generation of elders and the market economy values of the present generation. This story also hints at the dilemma which becomes a real issue in No

Great Mischief: that the attempt to preserve a “pure” Scottish culture may mean its ultimate demise as the “pure” group becomes smaller and smaller.

MacLeod has stated clearly that he does not want to be seen as a representational writer (he says in his interview with Mark Fortier, “you always find out that you don’t represent as many people as you thought” [40]), but in many ways he works hard to strengthen the myth of the Scottish folk as a kind of postcolonial resistance against the threat of homogenizing commercial culture. His characters are almost exclusively of Scottish descent, and their Highland heritage is a key part of almost every narrator’s identity—though not always a positive one. Nearly all male, his narrators are miners, loggers, and fisherman—the iconic Cape Breton labourers—who, though physically tough, have rich interior lives. They are often classic romantic heroes: scarred inside and out, grappling with their emotions in stoic silence while cultivating personal relationships with the land. These men are not so much representative of Cape Bretoners as of the masculinized Folk stereotype.

MacLeod, who thinks of himself as a “realistic writer” (Fortier 39), rarely moves beyond depicting a Cape Breton that is rural, poor, difficult, beautiful, and above all, almost exclusively of Scottish Highland descent. In MacLeod’s fictional world, Cape Breton identity is synonymous with Highland Gaelic identity. Gaelic is a common and important language, and even though he accurately depicts the young generation with little knowledge of it, it is unquestioned as the ancestral language. Even among the young, the Gaelic phrases and songs have an almost spiritual presence that binds the old and new in an ancient, and inescapable heritage. But in much of MacLeod’s writing, Gaelic language is the manifestation of an almost genetic connection between Cape Breton Scots. Characters are connected to each other and to the land in a way that is inescapable—despite the best efforts of many narrators to

move beyond its insular community.

In MacLeod's first story, "The Boat," the narrator is still haunted by his Cape Breton upbringing. Despite an outwardly peaceful life as a university professor, he tells us that "there are times even now, when I awake at four o'clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept" and it is only later that "I realize that I am foolishly alone, that no one waits at the base of the stairs and no boat rides restlessly in the waters by the pier" (1). In this early story the family history is tense, and Gaelic identity is linked to an emotional sensibility, though the language is never spoken. The narrator fishes with his father uncomfortably for years, feeling the tension between his parents who view traditional culture differently: his mother rejects all outsiders, while his father spends all his spare time reading about the wider world. The community is defined by its ethnic history—by its population of "impulsive, emotional Catholic Celts who could not bear to live with England" (4).

The community is articulated in the only scene where Gaelic traditions are brought out for display. The narrator's sisters, who work at a resort frequented by American tourists, bring home some visitors who want to experience the "authentic" culture embodied by the narrator's father—a "real" Cape Breton fisherman. The father takes the tourists for a ride in his boat, and the narrator sees his father momentarily through these strangers' eyes. There is incongruity between the reality of his father's life and the cleansed, romanticized expectations of the tourists: for instance, the father has to put newspaper over the "splattered blood and fish entrails" (Island 12) on the boat so that the tourists can sit. Later the father visits their lodgings, drinks too much and begins to sing Gaelic songs.

The incident is the only time the narrator hears Gaelic or hears his father sing, and the experience haunts him:

The familiar yet unfamiliar voice...made me feel as I had never felt before in my young life, or perhaps as I had always felt without really knowing it, and I was ashamed yet proud, young yet old and saved yet forever lost, and there was nothing I could do to control my legs which trembled nor my eyes which wept, for what they could not tell. (13)

As often happens in MacLeod's writing, the Gaelic songs speak almost viscerally to those of Scottish descent, even if they have had no exposure to them in their lives. The Gaelic pulls the lost tribe together in a way that is almost mystical, and that has only partially to do with meaning. This narrator does not understand Gaelic fluently, he knows only enough to realize that his father is singing a variety of songs from various backgrounds and to note the absurdity of the tourists and their tape recorders assuming that the mix of fishing songs from Newfoundland to Boston, drinking songs and folk songs are all "Scottish." It is the older community in the village that, overhearing the singing, do understand the meaning, and "smile at the coarseness of some of the verses and at the thought that the singer's immediate audience did not know what they were applauding nor recording to take back to staid old Boston" (13-14). In this incident, the Gaelic songs broaden the story's community beyond the insular family to both the level of other members of the town and beyond to the world outside Cape Breton and even Canada—reconnecting in that moment the Scottish diaspora.

In "The Closing Down of Summer" (1976), a powerful story about a group of miners taking a break and reflecting on their lives before taking another assignment, Gaelic again has a strong bonding pull. Again, the youngish miners have some experience of Gaelic, but aren't fluent speakers until they undergo an almost mystical reconnection to their language. The group is known as "MacKinnon's Miners," and the narrator is their leader, presumably

MacKinnon himself. The miners are an isolated, insular group in this story, and it is their isolation from the world above ground that leads to their rediscovery of Gaelic and of their Scottish identity. The narrator as a young man “did not even realize [he] could understand or speak Gaelic and entertained a rather casual disdain for those who did” (194). Yet during their time underground, in what MacLeod earlier refers to as “the land of the dead” (194), magically, “it began to bubble up somehow within [him]...[a]s if it had sunk in unconsciously through some strange osmotic process while [he] had been unwittingly growing up” (194). The miners revert to singing the traditional songs more than anything contemporary, “because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar” (194).

This profound, private relationship with the language begins to create a chasm between the miners and the continuing modern world that they feel less and less a part of. The Gaelic is a way to express their experiences in the underworld, and they find it increasingly difficult both to describe that world in English and to participate in the Scottish festivals that become so popular around them. The miners realize how distanced they have become from even the wider Nova Scotian community when they are invited to sing at a festival related to the “Celtic Revival” MacLeod describes as well underway in the 1970s. The festival, “fostered largely by government grants,” has “little relevance” to the miners (195), much to their disappointment. Where underground Gaelic has become a powerful force connecting the miners to both each other and those men who mined in Gaelic for a century, on stage their singing

seemed as lonely and irrelevant as it was meaningless. It was as if we were parodies of ourselves...mouth[ing] our songs to batteries of tape recorders and to people who did not understand them. It was as if it were everything that

song should not be, contrived and artificial and non-spontaneous and lacking in communication. (195)

Here MacLeod directly subverts the romantic Scottish image created in the Nova Scotia summer festivals, and throughout the story presents an alternative vision of how the authentic language is meaningful in a functioning way. Unfortunately, that sense of the miners' language and history is also a key part of what keeps them isolated and keeps Gaelic an "underground" language. MacLeod offers no solution, other than the stories themselves, to this catch-22: either the language remains pure but static and isolated, or it is "revived" artificially, bringing more people and life to what proves to be a relatively meaningless simulacrum.

The image of the miners discovering their heritage underground is a powerful one. Uwe Zagratski perceives the mining image as a "symbolic act of uncovering an identity" (Harper and Vance 299). She writes that the miners, besides being a dying breed themselves, are "privileged to record declining cultural practices—go underground to uncover their roots which have been overlaid with English speech and culture" (304); they are "cultural anthropologists" who are "digging through the cultural layers" (305). Certainly MacLeod layers many myths onto the dark underground spaces where the miners spend their lives: they travel through dark tunnels to a time of pre-birth, where their ancestral language and songs mysteriously take over despite its relative strangeness to these descendents. The mining tunnels are both birth canals and tunnels through time, as well as tunnels through the strata of social history.

These layers have two effects. The images imply that the Celtic culture in Cape Breton is not an imported one, but in fact is natural, somehow organic; that in Cape Breton the

land itself is Gaelic and Celtic, and that the culture grows out of this land. Although romantic, this perspective is unfortunate, as it also perpetuates the stereotype of the Scottish Cape Breton miner, which excludes the immigrants (Polish, Ukrainian, Acadian, etc.) that moved to Cape Breton to find a place in the mines. Secondly, there is an odd omission in the physical connection between Cape Breton culture and Cape Breton land: that as cultural anthropologists, what the miners unearth reveals no trace of the peoples who inhabited the island before the Scottish settlers. The miners discover no artifacts or remnants of previous settlers (the Vikings or French, for instance), and certainly nothing that connects to the displaced Mi'kmaq people. A similar problematic erasure of Aboriginal culture is evident in No Great Mischief—as I shall argue later.

In “The Tuning of Perfection” (1984) MacLeod continues to wrestle with how Gaelic culture might survive. Archibald, the protagonist, is a great-grandfather of seventy-eight years, and the only one of his family still fluent in Gaelic. It was Archibald’s great-grandfather who emigrated to Cape Breton from the island of Skye, and Archibald remains connected to those original settlers. He lives a stone’s throw from the original house, and is one of the community’s legends: one of the few left who was raised in Gaelic song, music, and language. MacLeod describes Archibald’s tragic family history and explains why he continues to live alone at the top of a mountain, while his large extended family (including children and grandchildren) live in the town below. The geographical distance parallels the cultural gap between Archibald’s generation and culture and that of his modern descendants. When a competition is announced for a “typical” Cape Breton musical family to be televised for a special, the two world views—traditional and modern—find themselves at odds.

Archibald’s granddaughter, Sal, is the character who represents the modern family,

and it's she who makes the trip up the mountain to tell her grandfather about the contest. It's the "year of 'Scots around the World'" (284) and there is a celebration in Halifax for a week, including televised performances for the Royal Family—perhaps the ultimate post-colonial irony. Where the miners in "Closing Down" have found this kind of experience a betrayal to their culture, Sal sees the concert as an opportunity to make some money, be involved in something glamorous, and have a paid vacation. Though not fluent in Gaelic, Sal does know some of the "old songs" and sings one for her grandfather. He is impressed by her strong voice, but she sings without feeling, as if it's a "milling song" rather than the "lament for a loved one that's lost" that it is (285). She doesn't know what the words mean and is sure that no one involved in the production will know either, but she is defensive, saying, "I just make the noises. I've been hearing the noises since I was two. I know how they go. I'm not dumb, you know" (285).

Like the miners, Sal's generation has learned songs and language through osmosis and exposure, but she has not had an experience equivalent to the descent into the land of the dead to awaken her latent understanding. By stark contrast, Sal and her family are excited by the possibility that these memories may have monetary value as cultural icons on the market. Despite the cynicism inherent in these thoughts, MacLeod makes sure that Archibald's family are not unsympathetic characters: Sal and her family, presumably like many on the Island, are in difficult financial straights, and have to make tough decisions. They don't understand that their Gaelic heritage might have a deeper meaning and that the performance might be a betrayal of some kind. After all, Archibald has stayed on the top of the mountain and made little effort to make sure that the cultural values were passed on to his family.

During the family's audition, modern market values are very clear. The show's

producer says to the family, “I really don’t understand your language so we’re here mainly to look for effect” (297). But despite the audience’s lack of awareness, the music seems to have a power of its own, and the family are described as singing “as their ancestors had done before them” (297). As always in a MacLeod story, Gaelic language and song have a connecting power for all those with Scottish blood. The producer cuts them off in the middle of another song and argues with Archibald. Archibald insists that the songs are narratives, full stories that cannot be edited or they lose all meaning. The producer replies, “they don’t make sense to me anyway, ...I told you I don’t understand the language. We’re just here to gauge audience impact” (298). Archibald is angry, but he finishes the audition to support his family, who think he is an old fool, but need him as he is the only one who really knows all of the songs.

Throughout the audition, it is easy to side with Archibald as he experiences, as the miners did, being on display for people who don’t understand what he is offering them. However, MacLeod makes sure that we are complicit in the role of audience at this point in the story. As the family sings in Gaelic, MacLeod prints the lyrics in Gaelic on the page. With no translation, and no pronunciation guide, no matter how much a non-Gaelic-speaking audience might want to understand the deeper complexities of the event, they are unable to. We are unable even to hear the lyrics in our minds as we read them, so there is no authenticity even orally, at the level Sal experienced the songs growing up. There is no way for us to immediately overcome this gap; the translation that MacLeod does give us is three stanzas, and while they provide some insight, Archibald has just told us that the songs won’t make sense unless heard in their entirety—often twelve or more verses long. The content revealed contains references that parallel what we’ve been told of Archibald’s own life, so we may

understand why the song has emotional resonance for him, but truly we have no way of understanding or even guessing at what other layers of meaning the songs might contain for him. This typical postcolonial strategy keeps us distant and perpetuates the exclusivity of the ancient heritage that sustains the community

At the same time, MacLeod later shows us that at least the prose format allows him to reveal more than is possible on television. When the producer later invites Archibald and his family to be the ones on the show, he is straightforward about his reasons: they are the best-looking. Archibald himself “stands tall and straight and ha[s] all [his] own teeth;” he has a “*presence*” (301). The producer is constructing images of Nova Scotia for an international audience, and he wants images that are flattering—regardless of their level of authenticity. He tells Archibald, “we want people who *look right* and who’ll give a good impression of the area and the province” (300). While the contemporary reality of Cape Breton might also be exemplified in the other groups who audition—a family scattered across the country with a grandmother struggling to pull them back together to the Island, for example—Archibald, with his irrelevant and uncommunicable knowledge of the old ways, is the desired image. MacLeod is able through the written word to tell us about who Archibald is—that he tends the forest like a garden, built his house without a power saw, understands the rare eagles that circle his mountain top. But a television audience will never know even that much. In the ultimate statement of that emptiness, the group that does do the television appearance (Archibald decides he cannot) sings songs that the producer deems more appropriate; they are shorter and more cheerful. But those songs turn out to be literally meaningless: “just a bunch of nonsense syllables strung together” (303).

When Archibald decides not to sing, much to his family’s disappointment, MacLeod

makes a similar point to the one made in “Closing Down.” Archibald dreams of his dead wife singing the songs “with a clarity and a beauty that caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck even as the tears welled in his eyes” (304). In the face of that perfection, he is unable to bear the thought of changing the songs in any way, and realizes that maintaining the purity of his culture is more important than supporting his family’s wishes. But Archibald’s dream brings us back to the catch-22: if he does change the songs he renders them meaningless, but if he maintains their purity, the culture may die with him.

MacLeod’s meta-solution—writing down the story for a wider audience—is a typically postcolonial one, but it offers only a partial answer. He gives the audience enough cultural translation to recognize that we are outsiders who will never fully understand the experiences described. Like many postcolonial writers MacLeod believes that his culture is unique and that to belong is a privileged position—he writes in “Closing Down” about the Gaels going to South Africa and watching a Zulu dance, and understanding that “primitive men” (which the narrator also considers himself) “dance mainly for themselves. Their dancing speaks a language whose true meaning will elude me forever” (196). He tells us that culture is *not* universal, it is ancient and must be pure or it is meaningless. But holding on to that purity in today’s unavoidably pluralistic world is impossible, and MacLeod’s response is nostalgia for a lost past. Almost all of his protagonists are haunted by their memories of a more perfect past and the trauma that exiled them from it forever. Maintaining the memory of that time, though, is, for MacLeod, the way to hold on to a specific Cape Breton identity in the midst of globalization. Unfortunately, in order to maintain that sense of purity, MacLeod must artificially create the idea of the perfect past (which McKay reveals to be a nineteenth-century romantic ideal), and add to the romance of Gaelic culture as mysterious and always “Other.”

In order to keep a sense of identity, MacLeod insists on staying limited to the status of “minority.”

Ironically, given his seeming devotion to the purity of the Gaelic language, in “Closing Down” MacLeod validates the way his miners function in the wider, above ground world. The miners, typical of Cape Breton Gaels, use English as their first language, and this frees them to be citizens of a postcolonial world. In fact, the impact of the English language has been a positive thing for their work, as it has enabled them to work all over the world. The narrator, MacKinnon, tells us that there are two other groups of miners as well known and talented as his own; they are “known by the names of Lafreniere and Picard” (202)—they are French-Canadian. MacKinnon speaks with great respect for these groups, they are among the few in the world who truly understand the lives the miners lead. But he is aware that his team is in a better position than the French speakers: “They will not go to Africa for Renco Development because they are imprisoned in the depths of their language” (203). The Gaels too are imprisoned by their language—their preference for Gaelic isolates them and keeps them happiest in the “depths” of the ground—but it is, ironically, their “hybrid” nature as residents of an English colony that is their key out of the French-Canadians’ trap. MacLeod may wish it weren’t so, but for the realities of the world today, there are advantages to being an English-speaking “settler-subject.” Second-World writers may be “trapped” in their position of constant mimicry of, in this case British, language and forms, but that position does allow them a certain privileged accessibility in the English-dominated world.

MacLeod’s writing is often referred to as having a “timeless” quality, and it is interesting that he wrestles with the same issues of ancient identity in a modern world in most of his stories whether written in the late 1960s or the late 1990s. His novel, No Great

Mischief (1999) demonstrates that though the world outside Cape Breton has changed a fair bit, what MacLeod portrays as the core culture remains “timeless.” MacLeod’s vision of cultural identity expands a little beyond its ethnic base and is prominently rooted in extended family. Where in “Tuning” Archibald’s family seems relatively indifferent to their heritage, in No Great Mischief every family member is haunted by their Gaelic-Cape Breton upbringing, carrying it with them wherever they go. Beyond immediate family ties, the novel suggests that the Cape Breton identity is even genetic, transcending all kinds of physical boundaries like time and space, and ultimately contained only by story. No Great Mischief tells the story of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* (the Scots Gaelic name for those of Calum the Red’s clan) or the clan MacDonald, and it is as if the story of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is the literal word (the legend and story) made flesh in Calum’s current descendents (or made fiction!). The MacDonald family’s identity is defined by its physical characteristics (red or very black hair, and a particular “colouring”), and by its names, especially Calum, Alexander, and Catherine. The identity is also defined by its history, in particular identity’s nature as migratory, and by its homelands—both Cape Breton and Scotland. Its relationship to all of these things is highly complex and interrelated, and requires regular retelling from several perspectives.

In fact what MacLeod illustrates is the fine line between the preservation of oral culture and the myth-making involved in the creation of an ethnically defined culture. As Anne McClintock writes (adding to Benedict Anderson’s hypothesis), “nations” are “systems of cultural representation whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community” but also, importantly, “historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed” (89). While McKay

illustrates how this invention of social difference was invented and imposed at a provincial and folkloric level, MacLeod brings this situation to life: he gives us the story of the “real” people who are the mythic social difference both invented and performed—the idealized ethnic-based social difference come to life.

MacLeod relates the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*’s family legend, which begins—strangely, given the attempt to link this Scottish history to an ancient Celtic past—at the colonial moment. Alexander, the *gille beag ruadh* (the little red-haired boy), his twin sister and their older brothers are descended from Calum MacDonald, *Calum Ruadh*, who was from Moidart, Scotland. Calum married and had six children, and when his wife died, he married her sister, Catherine MacPherson, and had another six. They left for Canada around 1779; particular reasons for their departure are not part of the story—only the general myth “anyone who knows the history of Scotland...is not hard-pressed to understand the reasons for their leaving” (20). The “historical” part of the family story is left to remain part of the general myth, and we understand that this is supposed to be a somewhat representative story: the Cape Breton Gael’s creation myth, not just one family’s experience.

The family emigrated despite Catherine’s illness, and as they were sailing away, their dog jumped into the water and swam toward the boat. Though at first the family yelled at the dog to go back, when they realized she wouldn’t they encouraged her aboard, and she arrived with them in the New World. Catherine died on the voyage, and *Calum Ruadh* arrived on the Nova Scotia shore a single father and a grandfather, his eldest daughter having given birth (to another Catherine) during the passage. The family made it to Cape Breton Island (then independent), and were helped ashore by relatives already settled and “MicMacs...who were at home ‘in the land of the trees’”(26). Thanks to them, the new settlers made it through the

first of many harsh winters. *Calum Ruadh* died at the age of one hundred and ten, and was buried on an isolated Cape Breton headland, marked by a boulder that is engraved in Gaelic.

Alexander, the primary narrator, frames this story by stating, “these seem to be the facts” (20). “Seem” is the operative word, and before the novel is finished the story has been retold by several different family members several times over, each time with added information or revised images. In fact, this is the form of the novel as a whole: Alexander outlines a piece of his family history, then MacLeod lets us overhear conversations between characters where they discuss and shift our understanding of that piece of the story. So MacLeod is up front about his inventions, making sure we understand that history is a fluid, partially invented narrative subject to change like any other. Yet he does pre-suppose that we all share an understanding of “the history of Scotland” and agree upon the facts surrounding the Clearances. The novel’s structure does mean, though, that the past seems unusually present for these characters. They rarely discuss anything new or contemporary in their lives; conversations focus almost entirely on either the original stories, or on the ways in which those stories have revealed new ones, influencing present life. Alexander’s twin, Catherine, for instance, travels to Scotland with her husband and decides to visit the original family region; her story of reconnection with that place both deepens her understanding of her family legend and provides a new piece of the contemporary narrative that deals, not with current issues like the quality of her marriage, but with the past.

All of this implies that, for MacLeod, identity also exists on the level of story itself. If you are part of the story, you are part of the community. If you are part of the community, your identity is expressed through story. The story is ever expanding and being revised, yet the existence of the story is also a constant in this transient world. The stories survive over

generations and generations, and for these contemporary characters, the stories of their great-great-great grandfather are more real than much of their current lives. For the twins, Alexander and Catherine, whose parents died when they were too small to remember, their family *is* story—the only way they know their parents is through the stories of them.

MacLeod takes his time with the family on Cape Breton Island, establishing roots in a tightly-knit, geographically specific way. But much of the story takes place across Canada (Ontario in particular), following some of those who must migrate for work. Cape Breton literature often tells stories of out-migration from the point of view of the community left at home, but MacLeod follows the MacDonald brothers as they travel to the Canadian Shield to work as miners. Rather than express unhappiness with an economic climate in Nova Scotia that necessitates out-migration, MacLeod illustrates Premier Angus MacDonald's reading of out-migration as a romantic part of the Scottish culture. In fact, this aspect becomes almost genetic: One of Alexander's grandfathers is intent on proving that the eighteenth-century Highlanders who traveled to France and across Scotland to battle the English are the same ones who first came to Canada to fight with the English against the French on the Plains of Abraham. The *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is descended from those Highlanders, and the family accepts that its members will continue to travel in this tradition. In *No Great Mischief*, out-migration, and its related themes of isolation, exile, and homeland, are an ancient Highland tradition which continues to influence the present generation.

Alexander's experience in the mining camps in the 1960s is a moment when various ethnic groups, all usually marginalized by wider Canadian culture, come together and essentially differentiate themselves against each other. It is their difference from one another that distinguishes the groups, and those differences are bridged only rarely through their

shared experiences. The camp is a microcosm of multiculturalism (in the days when ethnicity was as contentious as race), with both “Canadian” groups—French, Newfoundland, Highland—and “international” groups—Portugese, Italian, German, Irish—represented, and with little distinction made between immigrant and migrant workers. The camp setting gives MacLeod an opportunity to depict the clan MacDonald from an outside perspective, as they are observed by the other miners:

Sometimes as we passed by certain voices would quietly attempt to identify us. “Those are the Highlanders,” they would say, “from Cape Breton. They stay mostly to themselves.” (137)

It is interesting to note that, in their work, these different ethnic groups seem to be living parallel stories, where in most moments the clan MacDonald is described as unique—these Highlanders from Cape Breton are somehow different from other Highland settlers.

MacLeod links the different ethnic groups in his descriptions of their communal activities, as in the camp dining hall: “Within the dining hall the ethnic groups sat by themselves, each group speaking its own language, leaning forward amidst gesticulating hands” (136). The Highlanders are no different, sitting by themselves and speaking Gaelic: “we spoke Gaelic more and more. Perhaps by being surrounded by other individual groups we felt our lives more intensely through what we perceived as ‘our own language’” (136). As in “Closing Down,” miners rediscover their language when isolated from the wider world. Alexander’s brothers living alone in the woods of Cape Breton also revert back to Gaelic, despite their fluency in English. When the Cape Bretoners are in a situation that seems to require them to express a clear ethnic identity, they “revert” to a Gaelic, Highland Scottish one, despite the fact that to be a “Newfoundlander” seems to be enough delineation for others.

MacLeod also implies that the MacDonald's have more in common with the Irish immigrants than with other Canadian groups. The "Highlanders" spend time with the Irish, comparing languages and empathizing:

"In Ireland," said the red-haired Irishman, "I have a home but no money. Here I have lots of money but I have no home." We raised our eyebrows in unison to indicate that we understood. (147)

There is a stronger link between those of Gaelic ancestry—and those presumably who share the colonial experience in the "old" country (including the red hair)—than between those who share the colonial experience in Canada.

At the same time, MacLeod makes sure that we understand that Cape Bretoners are unique. Besides the general sense of exclusiveness and almost incestuousness of the family throughout the novel (the repetition of names over generations, the way strangers recognize the members of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* on the street, the dominance of the physical traits through the generations regardless of the ancestry of other parents), MacLeod describes the Cape Bretoners in specific terms as special: "the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* worked in a different manner" follows on the heels of a description of "them," the universal miner (145). And, as in the short stories, MacLeod continues a postcolonial strategy of using non-translated Gaelic, which conveys the bond felt by the clan, perpetuates the sense of their special identity, and distances the reader who cannot belong to this culture.

Another major similarity between the short stories and No Great Mischief is MacLeod's complex treatment of indigenous people. Theorists continue to grapple with the complex levels of colonization in Second World countries, and the way Native peoples are treated remains a key issue. In No Great Mischief the moment of colonization is the defining

moment for the family, yet the MicMacs who welcomed and aided the settlers in their first year conveniently disappear thereafter. A Metis man who comes to the mining camp is treated well by the clan, who bring him into the camp as one of them. He is a strange, hybrid creature, and perhaps the ultimate postcolonial character: he fiddles like a Gael, but is Native in his lifestyle and physical characteristics. But, ultimately, like the MicMacs, he vanishes without explanation.

The absence of an aboriginal population in MacLeod's definition of Cape Breton identity is unfortunate, but, as Lawson describes, necessary for the characters to be able to claim the authenticity of their own presence on the Island. In Lawson's words:

The settler subject ... exercises authority over the Indigene and the land while translating his ... desire for the Indigene and the land into a desire for Native authenticity in a long series of narratives of psychic encounter and indigenization. (25)

No Great Mischief assumes the death of Aboriginal culture as something that has preceded, and in some ways paralleled, the fading of Gaelic culture today. Scots in Scotland continue to make the case for themselves as a colonized people, and MacLeod wants his Gaels to carry on that identity of oppression to Cape Breton. In order to maintain their role as authentic oppressed in Canada, the Highlanders cannot be invaders, and therefore the colonized must disappear.

Embodying Terry Goldie's theory of indigenization, the Cape Breton Gaels in the novel take over the role of indigenous authority in Cape Breton. The narrative of this ethnic group's journey traces the path from Scottish homeland to a Canadian one, but the family's history pre-dates confederation and even the Island's re-annexation to Nova Scotia, so within

a Canadian context, the Cape Bretoner's place in the Canadian "homeland" seems ancient. But MacLeod never questions their right to the land. His characters never encounter settlements that pre-date the MacDonald family, and the oldest human mark on their settlement is considered to be *Calum Ruaidh's* gravestone. Their bond to the land retains the mythology of McKay's Folk stereotype; it is deep and mysterious.

Alexander's brothers live in the woods and learn to communicate with wild horses, read the weather, and survive the most impossible storms. Alexander's oldest brother, Calum, was the leader of the brothers' pack when they were growing up, and he was the most attuned to the land. He had a mysterious bond with the creatures there, and yet it is his life that disintegrates the most over the years. When the novel begins, Calum's life is ending as a lonely alcoholic in Toronto, and Alexander drives to visit him. At the end of the story, Alexander receives a mysterious call from his eldest brother, which he immediately understands to be *the* call, and he drives to pick up his brother and drive the two of them back to the sacred burial ground of their Cape Breton homeland. Calum makes it back to the "original" property to complete his life's cycle and is buried next to his namesake ancestor. This is the special nature of the Cape Breton Gael: despite life in prison and years as a poor alcoholic like hundreds of others, Calum always carried his memories and land within himself, and knew he had a family and a place where he would always belong.

The novel's last paragraph is mythical in its references, and unites many of the novel's images of identity. The final thought is peaceful, and the images strangely connect Celtic identity with the Roman mythology of the artesian well and the ferrying of the dead:

I turn to Calum once again. I reach for his cooling hand which lies on the seat beside him. I touch the Celtic ring. This is the man who carried me on

his shoulders when I was three. Carried me across the ice from the island, but could never carry me back again.

Out on the island the neglected fresh-water well pours forth its gift of sweetness into the whitened darkness of the night.

Ferry the dead. *Fois do t'anam*. Peace to his soul. (283)

The Celts and the Romans—both empires destined to be great, both very much over, and of course, both very much colonizing empires. MacLeod has placed himself in an untenable situation in this novel: the story has great emotional power thanks to these links between this contemporary family and a pre-colonial noble tribal past, but the family exists in a realm all their own, separate from a Canadian history of colonization, which makes them seem strangely disconnected from the real world despite their strong physical bond to the Cape Breton land.

Kulyk Keefer believes this kind of bond to be “quintessentially Maritime and Nova Scotian” (Down East 27), but certainly this is a problematic belief today. As in “Closing Down,” MacLeod in No Great Mischief links the Highlanders explicitly to other colonized groups and indigenous peoples of the world: the Masai, the Irish, the French, the Zulus, and even at times Canadian First Nations people. But he never deals with the often privileged position of Scots in Canada, or the European immigrant’s complicity in being the threat to Native culture in Cape Breton or elsewhere. Given MacLeod’s explicit focus on “endangered cultures” and his association of the Cape Breton Gael with them, these are difficult omissions to rationalize.

While he doesn’t resolve this tension, MacLeod does seem to find some answers to the question of healing the traumas of the past in the present. Those characters throughout his

stories who are haunted by their pasts are, in No Great Mischief, able to find love and forgiveness. Where other characters are condemned to be marginalized, here loving grandparents fill a void, and the youngest of their grandchildren, Alexander and Catherine, find a niche in the wider world outside Cape Breton. While the memories are important, they are positive, not traumatic. An answer to the pain of out-migration seems to be to support the children when they leave, and to make sure they carry their stories with them: this family carries its sense of belonging in memory and story, and this seems to lessen the impact of leaving. The MacDonald clan ties are never really broken, only stretched, especially if the Scottish relatives who tell Catherine “you’ve just been away for a while” (160) are to be believed. In fact, what MacLeod seems to have learned is the lesson of one of his own powerful images: that of the individual spruce tree that will not fall even when its trunk is severed because its branches are so intertwined with those of the trees around it (239). Regardless of how or if you’ve been damaged or separated from the community, your story is so intertwined that you will always be a part of it.

The most difficult issue in MacLeod’s writing is his struggle to find a relevant place for the Cape Breton Gaelic heritage within contemporary life. No Great Mischief expands on the question, but remains fundamentally trapped by its postcolonial goals: MacLeod equates Gaelic Cape Breton with other threatened “tribes” to maximize its sympathetic value as a marginalized ethnicity, but in doing so he treats the Gaels as if their culture is doomed with no hope for future growth. Christopher Gittings hopes that there are important moments (like Calum’s death) that offer the opportunity to “establish personal identity in the present” (104), and to synthesize past and present into a new identity, but unfortunately this doesn’t go very far. For though there is peace between past and present in No Great Mischief, traditional

Gaelic life doesn't find a role in the MacDonald family beyond its power as memory. The stories, music, and language provide an important sense of meaning and belonging, and prove a source of strength and support through very difficult times. However they do so exclusively by being memory, by being limited to the past. The proverbs and lyrics gain a new layer of meaning and relevance, but family members do not continue to produce new ones, and it seems doubtful that Alexander and Catherine's children will understand any part of the Gaelic aspect of their history. Catherine's son hasn't even heard the family's definition in Gaelic—the central words of "*clann Chalum Ruaidh*"—and his mother chooses not to explain the phrase to him; instead she shuts the door and cries for the loss of some aspect of her own identity. It would be sad to think that this peace and healing meant that the cycle of Gaelic culture was coming to an end, but despite MacLeod's loving tribute, it seems destined to do so—at least in this fictive world—unless MacLeod writes Gaelic identity out of memory and back into the mundane relevance to daily life.

Alistair MacLeod is one of Cape Breton's most admired writers, and his work is emotionally powerful; reviewers often comment on the beauty of his portrayals of "traditional" culture. Kulyk Keefer, for instance, reads his very personal descriptions of mining as a response to Hugh MacLennan's descriptions of mining as a "brutalizing way of life that destroys in [Cape Bretoners] an innate sense of beauty and capacity for nobility" (Down East 36). But MacLeod tries to defend Cape Bretoners by linking them explicitly to a mythic past that is tribal, romantic, and, ultimately, over. Because MacLeod connects with a limited past rather than with the detailed events and influences of Cape Breton's Scottish history, his beloved Gaelic culture has no way to connect with the actual present, and is doomed to noble, fictional, death. Ian McKay reminds us that traditional Gaelic culture in

Cape Breton is disappearing much as MacLeod dramatises it in his fiction—by remaining the realm of grandparents seen as irrelevant. As long as writers like MacLeod articulate the romantic, fictional glory of the past rather than a way into the future, there is little hope for change.

## Chapter 2: “A Hundred Thousand Welcomes” to Margaret’s Museum

Sheldon Currie, like Alistair MacLeod, is a long-respected and influential Cape Breton writer. Though he has published numerous short stories, as well as two novels, over many years, in this chapter I focus on the phenomenon of his best known story, “The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum.” First published in 1975 in the Antigonish Review, the story was immediately acclaimed, and since that time has taken on a life of its own. Wendy Lill adapted the story into a radio play, and Currie extended it into a short novel (1995). Lill wrote a Governor-General’s award winning stage-play (1996), and Mort Ransen and Jerry Wexler used the novel as a starting place for their enormously successful film, *Margaret’s Museum* (1997). It is hard to underestimate the impact of Margaret’s Museum on the national and international perceptions of Cape Breton; though there are more widely known musicians, the film medium creates visual images that are hard to change, and these are the images that have become synonymous with Cape Breton mining culture. Though Currie’s stories are based on his own experiences growing up in Reserve Mines, the images and implications of the film are not always accurate, and much of the literary criticism has been oversimplified or not placed in cultural context. As a result, the story’s legacy is a complex one.

“The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum,” Sheldon Currie’s original short story, paints a picture of mining life as different from Alistair MacLeod’s sometimes romantic depictions as it is possible to be while still describing the same thing. Where MacLeod tries to instill a sense of nobility, physical masculine beauty, and a deep sense of mystery for what has become an important piece of Cape Breton’s cultural identity, Currie from the first sentence gives us a character who demystifies, and who is extremely unromantic. While Currie gives voice to a strongly Celtic community within Cape Breton, unlike MacLeod, these two are not

synonymous. There is more diversity in Cape Breton in Currie's story, though the two writers are describing similar places and times, even in depictions of Cape Breton mining culture. In this story Currie apparently does not feel the need to entrench his experience of Cape Breton life in myth—either by linking the Gaelic community to the ancient Romans, or by building on the myth of the humble Cape Breton Folk. Though it becomes evident that he is very concerned with the loss of traditional Gaelic culture during this period of mining, his post-colonial strategy to address that loss is very different from MacLeod's.

Currie gives his narrative voice to Margaret, a woman who is inherently outside the mining community, but who serves as a narrative bridge between the work and domestic sphere. Hers is also a voice that has not been heard much in either historical or literary discourses—though there has been work done to give voice to the miners, little has been done to give voice to the women affected by the mining world. Where MacLeod gains power for his Cape Bretoners by articulating their experience of rural life, these are also the images most produced by tourist material. Currie, by contrast, chooses to focus on the ugly, urban industrial side of Cape Breton deliberately ignored by the glossy photographs, as well as on the history of labour in the region—a sometimes violent, always contested part of Cape Breton's history. When Helen Creighton went to Cape Breton to collect folk songs, she noted that there were two types of songs, “traditional” and “native;” the latter were those written in the community about their various experiences, and would certainly have included songs of labour protest. These, she wrote, “we must dismiss with little comment” (Quest 130). Currie writes them back in.

From her first words, the protagonist of the “Glace Bay Miners' Museum,” Margaret McNeil, is a startling breath of fresh air:

The first time I ever saw the bugger, I thought to myself, him as big as he is, me as small as I am, if he was astraddle on the road, naked, I could walk under him without a hair touching. (89)

Although there is humour in this opening thought, and a sense of exaggeration that brings the old stories of Finn McCool or other Gaelic giants to mind, there is none of MacLeod's sense of mystery. And in fact, as Margaret continues her story, she continues to challenge the easy judgements that others take for granted. She is known around town, for instance, as a "snot-nosed whore," but tells us the whole story: she walked out with two boys when she was little, because they had, respectively, a nickel and fifty cents, neither of which Margaret had ever had for herself. She willingly admits that she "screwed them" for the money, and doesn't seem too put out by the reputation it earned her, even though, she says, "I didn't really screw either one of them because they didn't know how to do it" (91). Margaret is up front and unapologetic for her poverty, her life, her family tragedies, even her social position as a relative outcast.

"The bugger" in question in the opening sentence is Neil Currie, whose presence heralds what will be a major change in Margaret's life. Neil is from rural Cape Breton, raised with Gaelic and bagpipes and the ancestral legends that Alistair MacLeod writes about so poignantly. But when Neil arrives in "the Bay," he might as well be a foreigner. Indeed, Margaret's mother, upon hearing that Neil was fired from the local mine because he wouldn't speak in English to the foreman, asks famously, "You an Eytalian?" (97).

Neil has arrived in the urban industrial sprawl of northeastern Cape Breton, the very non-picturesque clutch of mining areas that encompasses Glace Bay, Reserve Mines, New Waterford, Sydney, North Sydney, and Sydney Mines. To this day, Sydney remains the

province's largest city after Halifax/ Dartmouth. Tourism is not a major industry, and Cape Breton's illustrious labour history and charged politics are rooted in this area. The area's job prospects, especially before and during World War I, attracted a large immigrant population from the rest of Cape Breton (especially Acadians and rural Scots) as well as from countries like Lebanon, Italy, China, and Eastern Europe (along with Britain and Ireland). Indeed, the fictional White Rose Cafe, where Margaret is sitting when Neil walks in, is run by a Chinese family. When Neil is forcibly removed from the restaurant after playing his bagpipes, he comments, "One thing I thought a Chinaman would never have the nerve to do is to criticize another man's music" (95-96). Neil is evidently familiar with Chinese music, and given that he's just arrived in Glace Bay, he must have heard it in a more remote part of Cape Breton. Margaret's family later trades stories for Neil's songs, and Margaret, at her grandfather's request, tells the story of George Stepenak, a Polish immigrant who also worked in the mines and was goodnaturedly teased for his habits. Despite the cultivated image of Cape Breton as a homogenous place, even in the 1940s there were established ethnic communities that interacted regularly. The actual Glace Bay Miners' Museum contains a display on these immigrant communities in the area and their key role in the mines. Where other parts of Cape Breton were marketing themselves as homogenous, rural Scots, this industrial region was bustling with very modern life.

Much is made in the story of Margaret and her family's ignorance of their own ancestral culture. Not only does Margaret's mother not understand that Neil was speaking Gaelic rather than English in the mines, but Margaret has no idea what Neil's bagpipes are, before or after he puts them together and begins to play them. Margaret's first impression of the music that results is typically straightforward and very funny:

I never seen bagpipes before. Never knew there was any. He pulled it all out of the box and started putting sticks on sticks till it was together; then he pumped it up. It snarled a couple of times, then when he had it between his arm and his ribs he came down on it with his elbow and it started to squeal, and everybody in the cafe either leaned out or stood up to look at the God-awful racket. Then his fingers started jumping and it started playing something I don't know what it was. To me it sounded like a cut cat jumping from table to table and screaming like a tiger. (94-95)

Traditional Scottish music, despite Margaret's first reaction, ends up becoming a major part of her seduction. Neil is able to express things she didn't realize she needed to—including memorializing her brother Charlie Dave's early death in the mines. Neil uses music to show Margaret his attention and intentions, and she gradually comes to trust and love him. Once he has written her a song of her own ("Margaret's Wedding") and the song for her brother—covering her happiest and saddest experiences—she agrees to marry him, and the music remains an important part of their relationship.

The traditional bagpipe music also reawakens Margaret's grandfather's relationship to his family. When Neil comes to Margaret's home and plays for the first time she stops him for fear of waking her grandfather, who is essentially an invalid after having worked in the mines all his life. But the grandfather immediately recognizes the tunes and asks for some specific ones in Gaelic. He still remembers "the old ways," and he and Neil form an immediate connection, which in turn reconnects Margaret and her brother with their grandfather—now able to share some of his wisdom and experience.

When Margaret agrees to marry Neil, it is assumed that he will go find work at the

“No. 10,” where her brother Ian works, and sure enough he does successfully. She briefly describes Neil and Ian becoming close friends, arguing, playing cards, and drinking for long hours into the night. They talked “politics and religion” (104), and about the future of mining, unions and the CCF. Margaret simply says “That’s the way it went from then on” (108). But it doesn’t go on happily like this for much longer; within a few sentences Neil has gone to work at the mine with Ian, there’s an accident and both men are killed. Margaret finishes the story quickly and straightforwardly, adding Currie’s famous macabre twist. She brings the bodies to her mother’s and cuts off what she believes are the most important parts of their bodies (Ian’s, Neil’s and her grandfather’s, who died while she was at the mine looking for the others): the lungs from her grandfather and Neil, Neil’s fingers and tongue, and Ian’s “dick since he always said to Neil that was his substitute for religion” (110). She also keeps the scribbles her grandfather wrote in and where she recorded Neil’s song about Charlie Dave. She packs her own suitcase after stowing the pickle jars containing the organs with a friend, and then, in a page, enters and is released from the local mental institution, returns to the house that she and Neil built and lived in together, and sets up her museum.

The speed of the narrative’s end adds to its shock value: we have been moved along at a comfortable narrative pace, then suddenly are swept up in this startling plot twist before we can adjust. The last paragraph describes Margaret and her friend Marie setting up the museum, and tells us “We give tea and scones free to anyone who comes. You’re the first. Perhaps you could give us a copy of your tape when you get it done. That might make a nice item” (112). Within these few lines, not only are we confronted with what Margaret has done, but we learn that we are not innocent audience, but in fact visitors to the museum who are

recording Margaret's narration in some way. We are the outsiders, the tourists, perhaps even the folklorists, and we are forced to consider ourselves in that role.

It's difficult to do justice to the thematic complexity of Currie's deceptively simple story, and unfortunately easy to oversimplify. James O. Taylor, for instance, states unequivocally that Currie's theme is "the destruction of the Celtic heritage by the mines" (145). Taylor, unfortunately, is typical of many literary critics who don't question their own historical assumptions before contextualizing the works they are analyzing. It appears that Taylor may be confusing the story that he's addressing with some of its later incarnations, as he mentions small details—"the company store remains an ever-intrusive presence" (151)—that are indeed true in the film, but that are not yet mentioned in the short story he's analyzing. To defend his argument about Currie's unified theme, Taylor also uses some dubious historical evidence. Although he is appropriately careful in his background summary of the Clearances, stating that "the truth of the story has been much debated" (148), when talking about more recent Cape Breton history, he writes, without question:

Before the coming of the mines to Cape Breton, this heritage of song and story was alive and strong; and indeed in the rural communities, it still gives sustenance to the spirit which makes life meaningful. It is only in the industrial areas of Sydney, Glace Bay, and New Waterford that the tradition has lost its force. (149)

Taylor's article, though in other places thoughtful and insightful, here reveals the insidiousness of the stereotypes MacKay describes in their early stages. It is folly to suggest that Gaelic culture in Cape Breton was exclusively destroyed by the coming of the mines, and it is inaccurate to suggest (as Currie never does, although the movie implies) that Cape

Bretoners were passive victims of mining companies, or that, sadly, Gaelic culture remains intact in rural areas. Silver Donald Cameron, originally writing for *Canadian Geographic*, writes that across Canada (Cape Breton of course not being the only place settled by Highlanders) “the technology of highways, radio, phonographs, and newspapers pushed Gaelic to fringe areas once more,” he describes it, as MacLeod and Currie do, as a “language spoken by grandfathers” (Centre of the World 218). Cameron is in fact writing of the generations of the fading Gaelic culture in rural Cape Breton, which has by no means emerged unscathed.

Perhaps more important a flaw in Taylor’s remarks is the belief that the mines were the universal oppressor in Cape Breton. The role of mining is too complex an issue to give thorough investigation here, but surely it is self-evident that the mines were merely one aspect of a world-wide move toward industrialization which in Cape Breton also included major forces like the iron and steel industry. If MacLeod is to be believed, mining may have had less of an impact on Gaelic than the fishing industry: in the mines the miners could speak whatever language they wanted (as long as you spoke English to the foreman, according to Neil Currie), whereas fishermen had to learn English to make sure they could negotiate daily on an equal footing in the English-speaking marketplace (see MacKay). In “The Closing Down of Summer,” of course, the isolated community of Scots that comes together underground is where Gaelic culture is truly revived, and the general, daily life of appliances and television becomes the destructive force.

One of the most interesting stereotypes in Taylor’s argument is the idea that Cape Breton miners were heroic martyrs in the fight against industrial oppression. Neither history nor Currie’s writing supports the popular conception that unfortunately taints the movie and

the Island's national profile. In the short story, Currie's politics are hinted at in the passage where Margaret describes Ian and Neil arguing about the future. Ian tells Neil that the only hope for the miner "was to vote CCF and get a labour government" (104). Ian is passionate about the possibilities for the future in "voting. Organizing" (104), while Neil is cynical and believes the future for them holds only what it held for Ian's grandfather: black lungs and irrelevant memories. Yet in the story, Neil seems to have no qualms about working in the No.10.

The plot thickens, though, when Currie expands his short story into novel form. He weaves in some beautiful story threads, including a detailed plot line of the union movement. As in the story, Ian is passionate about the possibility of change through the labour movement. Neil sees only a long, historically based, tradition and future of victimization by distant capitalists. As far as he's concerned, the only way to fight the oppression is to live a vigorous, joyful life while not working at the mines, and, as in the short story, there is no question of his working at the No. 10. So Neil and Ian begin their argument on two sides of the ideological fence. On the one hand Ian seems naive, with youth's belief that anything is attainable; on the other Neil insists that the mines are the destruction of the Celtic heritage he represents. But Neil is also the voice of the passive; he sees the future only as the past repeating itself regardless of actions presently taken. Once the argument is underway, it is Ian who triumphs. So unusual is this event that it becomes Margaret's first entry into the scribblers, the first time she places herself into the historical narrative: "wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, Neil agreed that Ian was right about something" (81). In the course of their argument (surely one held before), Neil agreed that a union would be a help.

As the story progresses, and the miners eventually strike, Currie gives us a description

of a Cape Breton mining town during a strike. The miners and the community are, as historians agree, anything but passive. Margaret makes the specific point that the strike was a grass roots effort, crediting her brother for the action: “it wasn’t the president of the union that did it, it was Ian” (89). Ian also realizes that “we need the women to back up the men. If the women back up the men we could do it” (90). So Margaret and Ian’s girlfriend Peggy go to talk to the women, organizing and rallying, “getting them to support the strike and not be at their men to get back to work” (124). Currie’s portrayal of active union and miner involvement is much more historically accurate than the general oppression put forward in the film, and which is the more commonly held assumption.

According to historian David Frank, by the 1940s, District 26 (Glace Bay) was a successful branch of the United Mine Workers of America; “its campaigns for better wages, welfare and retirement plans, paid vacations and even public ownership of the industry were an important part of the local political culture” (42). The bitter battles, prolonged strikes and civil unrest which brought national attention, Frank argues, were struggles largely fought by miners of Ian’s grandfather’s generation in the early 1920s. Though in the 1940s there were still issues with safety and working conditions (and there was a strike in 1947), there had been improvements, and certainly, as Currie depicts in his novel, there was no shortage of activity among miners to continue making things better.

While Taylor’s suggestion that Currie is depicting the destruction of Gaelic culture by the mining industry is overly simplistic, the importance of Gaelic heritage to those of Scottish descent in Cape Breton, and these characters’ disengagement from that heritage, is of course a major theme. Neil Currie is an old-fashioned Scottish hero: a giant of a man, strong and intelligent, with the bard’s knowledge of history and song that needs to be delivered to the

people who have forgotten. Neil is shocked at Margaret and Ian's ignorance of the past, and as he tells her stories and plays his music, she is forever changed. We don't know how much of a storyteller Margaret was before she met Neil, but as her narration begins with his entrance, we can assume that his presence was an important catalyst. When Neil gives her the gift of the song written about her dead brother, (an example of the "native" songs dismissed by folklorists) she wants to give him a gift in return, so she tells him a story. When her grandfather finds out about the exchange, he too wants to tell stories, but as he can't talk, Margaret tells the stories that he suggests in his scribbler.

The first thing Margaret records in the scribbler for herself is Neil's song about Charlie Dave. Gradually, as she becomes more settled in her life and blooms as an adult, she finds herself going back to the scribblers more often. Throughout the various versions of Currie's story, the grandfather is the ancestral memory, but in the novel it is made especially clear that the grandfather is recording his personal and family history. Neil reads all the scribblers, and when Margaret eventually does too, she realizes that her grandfather is only their latest author, that the scribblers are a continuous set of journals begun by her great-grandmother Morag, who was one of the first women to move to Reserve Mines from the country. Margaret's reading of this history is a tremendously important element of the novel that appears again only in Wendy Lill's stage play, where it is also given prominence. The sense of history, and of female history in particular, changes Margaret's perspective on her role as storyteller within the family, and ultimately influences her final acts of preservation. Indeed, historian Tina Loo believes that "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" is in fact "about how we remember the past" (38).

The past in question, as in MacLeod's writing, goes back to Cape Breton's colonial

moment, and mythically beyond. Margaret and Ian seem at first unaware of themselves as Scottish and therefore the descendants of a proud line; they are aware only of those things that make them the same or different from others in their community. They are aware of themselves as Catholic, as opposed to the mine manager's family which is Protestant, aware of themselves as poor, as opposed to their wealthy relatives from Boston. And they are aware of themselves as urban, and therefore different from their relatives from the country, who in the novel attend Margaret's father's and Charlie Dave's wake. She tells us, "I didn't even know there was the country until then" (51). The country relatives speak Gaelic, even the children, and their English sounds different because of it, but while the Boston relatives seem like strangers, the "country people had on clothes just like us. They were nice. They talked very quiet, but smart" (52).

Margaret gradually comes to understand that she is part of a larger cultural community. Between meeting her country relatives, then reading about her great-grandmother Morag who left that country family to join her husband in Reserve Mines, and then hearing Neil and reading her grandfather's tales about the Scottish history before that, Margaret begins to feel more powerful and proud of who she is and how she got there. When she first reads through the scribblers she comes across references to their Scottish history penned by her grandfather. He writes, "It's kinda comical if it wasn't so sad, after the english [sic] army killed the half of us and then our own politicians gave us the boot we come here and started up and before you know we gave our own land away to work in a hole in the ground;" he writes a satirical rhyme directly linking Culloden with the present wars: "Seventeen hundred and forty-five, hardly half of them left alive; nineteen hundred and forty-four, half in the pit, half in the war" (80). As Margaret responds, "that's when I started to write in the scribblers. I still

didn't know what happened in 1745 and I was always a bit like Ian, who cares? but now I decided I would look it up" (81).

It is important that, unlike MacLeod's limited comments about Scottish history in No Great Mischief, Currie uses specifics. The cynicism in the grandfather's writing implies a much more complex, and more accurate, political Scottish history. Rather than herald back to the perfect, noble past soured by the Imperialist English, the grandfather recognizes that "our own politicians" were complicit in the Clearances, and that the Highlanders' own decision to work in the mines may not have been the best one for kin and culture. The grandfather's cynical accuracy also does not pass on a sense of doom to his reader, the way MacLeod's romantic myth does; instead Margaret is jolted out of her complacency and inspired to take action by learning about her Scottish heritage and by adding her voice to the stories.

The more she reads and the more the strike progresses, the more important Morag, Margaret's great-grandmother, becomes. Margaret admires and wants to emulate Morag's courage and independence, and she also intentionally takes on the role of bard: preserving and recording history. Unlike her husband's traditional war stories and political history, though, Margaret records domestic, family history, and fills in the gaps in the official version. She relishes her role, inserting "stuff I'd of never known" (111) into her own history, understanding that it is up to her to "write down all the things that happened since my grandfather quit doing it, and even go back and put in stuff I remember that he didn't put, or even stuff he did but I had a different idea of it. I loved doing it" (112). Margaret finds her voice, and we are the lucky audience to both her transformation and her story. Currie adds layers of voices to the official, as well as to the mythic, history, and those voices are personal, vibrant and active—a far cry from the passive folk enjoying their simple lives.

There is no question that Currie criticizes the influence of industrialization and its link to the global market on Cape Breton's cultural heritage, but he does not universally condemn. Currie gives us a section from Morag's scribbler that records the conversation Morag had with her mother about leaving the country for the mining towns. The conversation is complex, and, it is easy to believe, typical of many that happened in barns across Cape Breton at the time. Morag tells her mother she is leaving, that "there is nothing for me here" (114). Her mother replies, "it's not nothing. It's your family. It's the land. It's the music that you love" (114). But Morag, as a woman, will not have access to the land unless she marries a land owner, and her mother agrees that there is no one suitable in the community. Morag points out that there's no music left in the community either, that "they're all gone to work in the Glace Bay mines, the fiddlers, and the pipers, and the dancers, any that can walk at all and sober. They took the music with them" (115). Her mother replies, "without the land, the music won't last" (115). Ultimately Morag's mother blesses her daughter's departure, but warns, "keep your God, your tongue, your music and get some land" (115).

The implication, then, is that Margaret's great-great-grandmother's words were prophetic, that generations later the music has been lost without the land, and that those that moved to the mines made a mistake. But Currie's message, through Margaret, is not so straightforward. The music is not all gone: though Margaret doesn't know too much about it, when she describes the wakes they are full of fiddlers taking requests and playing the old tunes long into the night. When Neil brings the pipes back into the community, the songs he plays are familiar to many, though most of those are of an older generation. Perhaps more important is the way in which Margaret is changed by her contact with her Gaelic heritage. She learns the songs, learns bits of Gaelic and begins to understand, not her place in a long

line of victims, but how these pieces of the past are relevant and motivational for her life today. It is from Morag's story that Margaret finds the energy to rally union wives and begin to fully participate in the life of the community. In Margaret that story and music is revived, regardless of how the mine kills her family. Indeed when Ian, Neil, and her grandfather are killed, she does not crumble and become lost or bitter. She continues her perceived role as communal memory when she tries to preserve from the bodies those parts that are meaningful in some way to her and her story, that she will want to share with others through the museum. So she, as Uwe Zagratski reports, preserves the "'means of production' required for [the culture's] survival: tongues, fingers, lungs and sexual organs are retained for better times and in stubborn opposition to Neil's pessimism about the Celtic Cape Bretoner's fate" (Harper and Vance 307).

Zagratski also points out the possible connection between Margaret's mutilation of the dead bodies with the fact that "mutilation and death are the miners' constant companions and growing accustomed to them is an appalling feature of bereaved families lives" (306). But while in the short story we can be shocked out of that desensitization by Margaret's blunt narration, in the novel Margaret has more subtlety and shows us more of the emotional cost. She also, though, shows us that she is strong and confident, and knows, from the time that her men are dead, what she is destined to do. Their stories must be preserved, not through mere pickling, but on display for an audience. The act of creating a display suggests more than just preservation of a dead culture, but also a desire to not admit its death, to continue to provoke talk and life.

Once The Glace Bay Miners' Museum was published (1995), the story seems to have taken on a life of its own. The next year, Wendy Lill's play based on the novel was published

and performed to great acclaim. Though the film *Margaret's Museum* credits Currie's novel as a source for the screenplay, it's clear that many of the changes necessary for the story to come to life on film were borrowed from Lill's work. She had already successfully faced the challenges of bringing the story to three-dimensional life, as Ransen needed to for the film: expanding characters to allow for more voices, expanding scenes to allow for characterization and plot movement to be based on more than narrative description and to unpack the rhythms of daily life only hinted at in the stories. In doing so, of course, she changes the story and its focus, and chooses a more defined message. Though there remains a sense of the mines as an oppressive force, and a sense of mourning for the loss of prevalent Gaelic culture, Lill focuses primarily on the theme of memory in the printed version of the play. There is a sentence after the list of characters and setting that states, "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum is a memory play," and the play clearly explores personal memory's role in collective identity.

It is difficult to analyze a play solely through its script, and obviously individual performances reinvent Lill's work each time. Though one of the joys of drama is this ability to stretch and create something new with each performance, Lill has provided a framework text that must be followed. Rather than providing a detailed discussion about the differences between drama, script and short story/novel, I will concentrate on Lill's script as text, and will look at the underlying messages and assumptions in her re-framing of Currie's story. The messages about identity and stereotype are scripted by Lill and later in the film by Mort Ransen, and thus are "readable" as discourses present regardless of the variations of performance.

The play is framed very explicitly in Margaret's memory, beginning with the opening monologue, which takes place in Margaret's museum: she is giving us a tour through some of

the artifacts: a teapot from her mother's house, the men's mining gear. Perhaps even more strikingly, though, Margaret opens the play singing in Gaelic. It is a snapshot that we don't get in Currie's work, a glimpse of Margaret's life a little later than when we leave her unpacking her museum in the stories. She has fully embraced her history, learned the old songs and is telling us, as Neil used to, that "If it weren't for that little stretch of water out there you could see right clear over to the Isle of Skye" (9).

Though Margaret is thus established as the play's primary narrator, to work as a stage play Lill expands the characters of Margaret's family. Margaret's mother in particular is given a full role alongside the younger characters, as well as a name, Catherine, which she has never had before. Among other benefits, Catherine's expanded role allows Lill to balance the female and male characters, and bring forward the sense of women's history and connections in contrast to the men's, while offering both as a challenge to the official, political history, and to stereotyped perceptions of Cape Breton identity.

Catherine is presented as a bitter, cynical woman who has had to manage on her own after her husband and oldest son were killed in a mining accident. She is brusque, sharp-tongued, and morbid, but she is allowed, in the play, some moments of tenderness, dignity, and growth, especially in some small scenes with her father in law. Through the scribblers we also get a glimpse of her as a younger woman, which fleshes out a life cycle revealing the effects of tragedy on an individual personality. Catherine's matriarchal presence works well as a counterpoint to Margaret, though we lose the sense we have of Margaret in the stories as the only woman in a very male world of grandfather-husband-brother and political history, and we lose some of the impact of Margaret's discovery of Morag, her great-grandmother, as another female role model. But Catherine's presence also fleshes out the sense of family, and

the small details of family connection make a sense of pre-existing family history and memory plausible.

Lill also uses Catherine to illustrate Neil's influence. If Neil is, as Peter Urquhart suggests, "the text's resistance on the issue of nation" (17), then Catherine represents the discourse of domestic life as it exists, helpless, under oppressive circumstances like poverty. Catherine is part of the transitional generation of Gaelic identity: her parents spoke Gaelic and, like her father-in-law, knew all of the traditional songs, but if she remembers anything she considers it irrelevant to her life today. Her children are completely ignorant of their cultural heritage because she has chosen not to transmit it and nothing else has filled the educational gaps. When Neil arrives, Catherine is suspicious, especially when she hears about his being fired from the mine. Lill has chosen to make Neil a returned vet from WWII, and when she discovers this, Catherine is more generous. Catherine's sense of nation at the beginning of the play is completely based on the official concept of Cape Breton as Canadian, she has no time or patience for a more fluid, personal cultural identity.

As becomes obvious early on, though the play is overtly framed in Margaret's memory, Neil is the primary active force or agent, and he affects everyone. Neil is informed about Scottish political history, and considers Cape Breton merely a new battleground in the colonial fight between England and Scotland. In Currie's version, Neil helps to empower Margaret, encouraging her resistance to the easy, ignorant road of poverty and social oppression. She learns about her life and family through her own agency. Strangely, for a feminist playwright like Lill, Lill chooses to give much of Margaret's agency to Neil. Neil tells Margaret to look at her brother differently; he also reads to her from Morag's scribbles (rather than letting her discover them on her own) which then become important property for

the whole family, rather than something treasured by and personal for Margaret alone. Where in Currie's account Margaret first discovers her power as a storyteller when she offers stories to Neil to pay him back for his songs, Lill has Neil initiate that too. In fact, the story about George Stepanak which heralds the beginning of Margaret's storytelling in the stories, changes dramatically in Lill's account. When grandfather asks Margaret to tell the story, she actually defers to Ian, cajoling him into doing the telling. Indirectly then, Ian begins to gain more confidence, and his relationship with Margaret is strengthened, but Margaret continues to give away or lose power to the men around her.

Ultimately this also decentres the play in a way that it never really recovers from. Margaret is still at the centre of the play, as she is in the stories: hers is the memory that survives to tell the tale, and hers is the final, dramatic act. But with Neil at the centre of the play, and by far the most powerful character, Margaret's final act of preservation and storytelling makes much less sense than it does in Currie's work. In fact, the collectivity of the play's action (that so much of the power is either given to Neil or is divided among other characters) is at odds with the preservation of Margaret's framework narrative, and that collectivity renders Margaret's final act an empty political one. Without the sense of personal, emotional build-up, her final act makes sense only as grief for Neil's energy and vitality and as a representative collective statement against the oppression of the mines.

Unfortunately, without our understanding of how detached Margaret is from her sense of communal identity as Gaelic Cape Bretoner, Lill also misses the opportunity to truly bring us an understanding of that identity. Neil makes many references to the Scottish history mentioned in the novel, and there is still a sense of awakening and commonality with Margaret's grandfather. Morag's writings are given more prominence, and indeed Margaret is

intended to be seen in the play as a newly self-discovered descendent in a long line of active, passionate Gaelic women. But with all the characters sharing Morag's legacy, and Neil taking even more prominence as the deliverer of culture, Margaret becomes less important as the transmitter of that history at the end of the play. In the final scene, Margaret is left with memories revisited while she stands in her museum, and she remembers (as the audience listens to) the messages of her family and hums a traditional Scottish folk tune. She tells the audience:

It's important to remember. Because we sort of are what we remember. And when you leave, take a walk out to the cliff. Take a good look.

And then she remembers Neil saying:

You know Mairead, if it wasn't for that bit of water out there, you could walk right up on the shore of the Isle of Skye. That's where we come from. (126)

At this, the end of the story, Margaret is acting strictly as communal memory. The stage directions call for the actors playing Neil, Ian, and Catherine to be onstage with Margaret so that they are present in the space that represents memory. But this means that Margaret loses power as an individual again, even in what is supposed to be her unique memory. There is little sense of her being changed personally (except perhaps by Neil's forceful personality), or speaking to us, the audience, in any way but representative of all of the lives we have witnessed. And her message, inherently in a stage play, is communal—addressed to a communal audience rather than to an individual reader. We all have to remember where we are from in order to know who we are. With Margaret mostly a collective symbol, some of the power of Currie's story is lost. The dilution of the narrative across characters and the choice to focus more on the larger, collective issues at the expense of the smaller, personal details,

means that the play more easily perpetuates stereotypes and transforms complex individual differences into collective symbols.

Although Mort Ransen's film version of the story also struggles with perpetuating easy stereotypes, *Margaret's Museum* is more successful at retaining and even expanding some personal complexity. The film allows for a level of intimacy and visual nuance in a way that Lill's version never really does. But, unfortunately, in expanding the story and the visual images of history, Ransen distorts some of the history and makes assumptions about cultural identity that are problematic for Cape Bretoners, regardless of the film's overall power.

Peter Urquhart, in his study of the book-to-film adaptation of *Margaret's Museum*, discusses the differences between the two media in terms of the discourses each can highlight—differences that alter the focus of resistance. He believes that we should let go of the assumption that both film and text are telling the same story and recognize that the stories will be inherently different—that the “main point of comparison ought to be on the study of narrative itself, and the relationships between narrative and form in fiction and in cinema” (14). Urquhart's distinctions are valuable, and applicable to Lill's stage interpretation as well. In addition to these comparisons though, I think it is important that we keep in mind that these are not two equal forms: it is likely that significantly more people have seen the film than have read the story (or seen the play), and that while Currie's story is specifically challenging some myths about Cape Bretoners, Ransen's film, though richer for what it can add, greatly undermines the resistance of the story. Given the national and international profile of the film, its impact in this undermining cannot be underestimated.

One way in which the film works is by recreating for an “outside” audience a world through word, picture and sound in a way that Currie's story would not be able to. Where a

Cape Breton reader of the “Glace Bay Miners’ Museum” would be able to supply the image of the tiny house, the slightly tattered clothes, the different accents that highlight differences in ethnic background, economic class and education level, the film is able to provide all these details of Cape Breton life to those not intimately familiar with the setting. This is one of film’s great strengths, but unfortunately also one of the ways in which film can instantly perpetuate stereotypes in a form (visual) that makes them even more difficult to challenge.

Ransen has been quoted as saying that he was first and foremost trying to make a successful film—one that was “emotionally accurate”—and didn’t see himself “engaging in any historical debate” (Hannant 696). Currie’s novel is described on its copyright page as “contribution” toward Jerry Wexler’s and Mort Ransen’s script for the movie; Wexler apparently fought for the rights to the short story for years. Although the film is clearly an adaptation of the novel, it also seems clear that there was no intention to be completely faithful to it. Ransen seems to have reinvented the story as film, rather than simply trying to translate the narration to the new form. Overall this is probably why the film is successful: it retains the emotional power of the stories, and provides in many ways a very accurate set of images of Cape Breton life that have not been brought to film before, especially for a national and international audience. Unfortunately though, some authenticity is lost. Ransen’s report that, for instance “the art and properties departments were responsible for the historical details” (Hannant 696) means that some of the stereotypes that Currie deliberately undermines are instead perpetuated. The film then becomes less an expression of local cultural identity for the nation and more a national expression of beliefs about Cape Bretoners.

Probably the most dramatic way in which this becomes obvious is in the way the film alters the novel’s politics. Though the film remains sympathetic to the miners and their

families, it does so in a way that is almost patronizing. David Frank has written about the historical inaccuracies of the film, the most important of which is the way Ransen sets the story in the 1940s (faithful to the book), but fails to depict a mining culture long since improved thanks to the action of miner's unions in the early 1920s. I've discussed how the stories show the active involvement of the community to fight injustices in mining conditions, how Ian's character depicts the grass-roots effort that, according to Frank, was quite successful. Although in the stories the particular strike is portrayed as futile politically, the complexity of the issues involved are explored by the mine manager in a conversation with Neil and Ian. Regardless of the success of the strike itself (and the miners are shown to win some concessions), its success as a community movement is unquestioned: families band together, there is music and parties, storytelling and support. And in the end, this sense of community gives Margaret another piece of her identity as a Cape Bretoner.

The film chooses to depict all of this much differently. Rather than do the historical research that shows the power and activity of the Cape Breton miners, Ransen rewrites the story with the miners as the victims of a brutal, overwhelming corporate system. "The mining company" is shown as loathed universally by the workers and their families as a source of death and poverty; Glace Bay residents are shown to be trapped and helpless. Neil refuses to work in the mines and Margaret refuses to live with him if he does, so the only work he can find is as a dishwasher in the local café. When he is fired from that job (the Chinese owner needs to give the job to his nephew), he has no options, and simply does odd jobs that are humiliating at times but still better than the mine.

Frank points out that Glace Bay in the late 1940s was a sizable industrialized community (the 1951 population was over 25,000) with a "substantial non-mining

employment sector” (41); certainly Neil would have had options. Where the story actually takes place partially in Reserve Mines, where Margaret’s family lives, and then sprawls through Glace Bay and surrounding towns, the movie sets the family entirely in the Bay, and then makes the town look like a tiny colliery outpost. Although in many ways this is not an important issue thematically, it is another example of a lost opportunity to show an accurate picture of that industrial section of the Island to the rest of Canada; Ransen chooses instead to show us another image of Cape Breton as rural, quaint, passive, and tragic.

In fact the film adds details, again ones that have no impact on the storytelling, that perpetuate this image unnecessarily. In one romantic scene, for example, Neil smuggles Margaret into the mine area to experience, luxury of luxuries, a shower—unavailable elsewhere in the Bay. She feels like she has been given a tremendous gift, that no other woman in the town had access to. According to Frank’s research, in Glace Bay in the late 1940s “services such as running water and indoor facilities were significantly better than in other coal towns; the idea that Margaret...might actually be the ‘first woman in Glace Bay to have a shower’ is not plausible” (41).

Urquhart makes the case that, due to film’s inherent differences in form, film needs to privilege the personal story over the political one, and this is certainly where the film succeeds. So “the utterly personal motivates many of the serious story events in the film, in ways that they are dominated by oppositional politics in the novel” (16). Rather than trying to bring “difficult-to-represent collective action” to life, the film therefore chooses scenes of “individual character development” (16). But the novel is arguably highly personal, and in fact, the movie transforms some characters completely. Margaret’s brother Ian is one of the story’s most complex characters. She idolized her older brother Charlie Dave, who was a

charismatic fighter. Ian struggles to find worth in the shadows—he is described as gentle and caring, highly intelligent and politically active. He is charismatic enough in his own right that the mine manager's daughter falls in love with him and ultimately defies her parents to be involved in his life and community. This is not an unusual storyline for a film!

But Ransen and Wexler transform Ian's foil to Neil into an ineffective, innocent youth. Ian becomes Jimmy, a teenage boy who tries throughout the film to prove his manhood enough that he might be able to join the mining workforce. Unbeknownst to him, his Uncle Angus (a new character) has already asked the mine manager to refuse to hire him regardless of what he does, in an effort to protect him. Jimmy does still have a romance with the mine manager's daughter. Her name is the very Anglicized Marilyn from the very Maritime "Peggy," her age is adjusted to suit Jimmy's, and she is very sexually aggressive. Her story of protest for justice is reduced to a clichéd one of a rich girl going after the boy from the wrong side of the tracks to rebel against her boring, wealthy life. Jimmy's is a story of "death of innocence in the mines" (Loo 38). Far from an active political participant in the community, he has to go to work in the mines only when Angus is unable to save enough money to send Jimmy to school elsewhere. Jimmy is killed, despite the best efforts of the family, by the shadowy, inescapable presence of the mine.

With the elimination of Ian's storyline of protest and action, the film's politics take an unfortunate turn. The story of the strike disappears, and the theme of futile struggle against largely unseen, oppressive forces takes over. Here the film also leaves the realm of historical accuracy. Or rather, as David Frank suggests, the setting of the 1940s gives way to a political setting of the 1920s. For by the 40s, strong union action, including some infamously bitter strikes and political activity in keeping a CCF member of parliament in office, had

“permanently affected the balance of power in the coal towns” (42). Most of the company stores were gone, replaced by miners’ co-operatives, and the mining trade, which had been so dangerous a generation earlier, was significantly improved. According to Frank, the death toll in 1946-55 across the industry was over 10 deaths per year, but that was a reduction by more than half what it had been between 1916 and 1925. While the industry remains, even today, as dangerous as any other, and is certainly still a powerful economic force in Cape Breton, it is also an example of the power of class solidarity and the potential of union strength. Currie said on CBC-TV’s *National Magazine* in 1996 that he wanted the film to help “people know what happened,” but without the historical context, the stereotype of the oppressed, helpless Cape Breton miner continues—inaccurate and unabated.

Jimmy’s ineffectiveness as a character though does allow the film to focus on the romance between Margaret and Neil, and this it does very well. Margaret’s character remains finely drawn here, despite the necessary fragmenting of her point of view. She is definitely the emotional centre of the film; her presence frames the beginning and end, and she is more powerful than in Lill’s play. Where in the stories Margaret’s love for her husband and family is to some degree left between the lines, in the film we are able to watch Margaret blossom and mature as her relationship with Neil enables her to grow. Interestingly though, Margaret seems to take on less of Neil’s passion for her Scottish heritage. She is shown at the beginning of the film as ignorant of that part of her history, but Neil is as exuberant about it as ever; he becomes a reviver of Gaelic, stories, and songs in the wider community. His sympathies and friendship with the elderly men in town, including Margaret’s grandfather are clear, but without the presence of her grandfather’s scribblers or Morag’s story, or Margaret’s country relatives, Margaret lacks the personal connection to her Scottish history. Gradually

the mine narrative takes over Neil's cultural one and dominates the rest of the film. Neil doesn't believe it noble for a Highlander to work underground, and in some way follows the paradigm that being in the mine kills the Scottish spirit. When he is forced by economics to take a mining job, he essentially stops participating in the Celtic community.

This dynamic is one of the film's major weaknesses. By attempting to de-politicize the story in order to focus more strongly on Margaret and Neil's love story, the film actually politicizes itself even more. By weakening Jimmy's character, bringing in Angus in his role as protector and surrogate father, and strengthening Neil's hatred of the mines, the film chooses to privilege a discourse of economic imperialism in Cape Breton by unidentified mining companies. By taking out the plot lines that show the local population's resistance to the mining industry's control, the film actually portrays the locals as passive victims: staying out of the mines, as Neil tries to, is futile, and staying in them is equally futile as it will inevitably lead to either lifelong handicap (as Margaret's grandfather experiences), or death. The women have no options besides praying that their men won't die, hoping that one of the other widows in the community will die so that they might advance up the list of pension beneficiaries, or, in Margaret's case, going mad. For Margaret's final act in the film comes across simply as grotesque lunacy. Without the context of her storytelling power or self-discovery, and with little of the theme of preservation and the importance of remembering your history, her final museum seems as crazy to the audience as it does to the unsuspecting tourist who stops for a peek.

In terms of post-colonial cultural identity politics, *Margaret's Museum* illustrates some of the unfortunate ironies of the reality of cultural production in the global market. Overall the film is powerful, was economically and critically successful, and is held up as an

important “Canadian” film. Maritime films that achieve national recognition, and especially distribution, are very rare, and in fact, Mort Ransen’s previous film, *Falling Over Backwards* (1991) was a box-office failure. Brian Johnson in *MacLean’s* magazine quotes Ransen as determined in his next film to cast a star—ostensibly to help the film get the publicity and distribution it would need to succeed at the box-office. From there the complexity of the film’s production expands dramatically. Though hailed as a “Cape Breton film,” (and it won awards at the Atlantic Film Festival as well as Genies) it wasn’t until the film expanded to become a Canada-Britain co-production that it was able to be made. Both its main stars, Helena Bonham Carter and Clive Russell (Margaret and Neil, respectively), are British (Russell is from Scotland—and his accent is more consistent than Bonham Carter’s), and though the town scenes were filmed on location in Cape Breton, the colliery scenes were ironically filmed in Scotland. The rest of the cast, though primarily Canadian, and universally excellent in their performances, were, with the exception of some of the extras, not from the Maritimes either.

The Nova Scotia government began to pour money into attracting the film industry to the province around the time *Margaret’s Museum* was made. Always on the lookout for non-resource based industries to help its high unemployment rate, it began funding local efforts and production studios, as well as offering incentives to foreign productions. To some degree its efforts have been successful; there is growing local film industry, mostly out of Halifax, and a few productions (like Thom Fitzgerald’s *The Hanging Garden* and the recent *New Waterford Girl*) have even received national attention. The province has also become an attractive substitute for more expensive American movie settings. But what kind of impact does this have on Cape Breton’s identity?

I think *Margaret's Museum* illustrates the most common and difficult issues in national cultural image production today. A film is inherently a very complex project that involves huge amounts of money, many, many people (some with highly specialized skills), lots of time and labour intensive equipment. Outside of Hollywood and Bombay, it is perhaps inevitable that good films get made when smaller economies combine forces, when the labour pool is then broadened. Regardless of its British co-production status, there is no question that *Margaret's Museum* is a Canadian film in story, audience, characters and message, and it is distinctly about Cape Breton, based on a story of the highest credentials. The danger of its being made by outsiders, though, is in the creative freedom allowed by art. Ransen is quoted as saying "I don't mind making mistakes if they help me tell a greater truth" (Hannant 697), and in terms of the emotional weight of Margaret and Neil's story, he may be right. But when all responsibility to the accuracy of the depiction of a culture is foregone, the result is highly problematic. Ransen bases his sense of Cape Breton labour history on general social assumptions, and doesn't worry about perpetuating those, even if the end result promotes a completely different message from the text on which it's based. This is typical of historical film (and perhaps inevitable), but it is unfortunate, especially given film's power to create long-lasting images of a people or historical event. And so, while, as Peter Urquhart writes, the film version of this story is still a discourse of resistance, at least from a gender perspective, from a cultural identity perspective, the film leaves us not much farther ahead. As Tina Loo observes, the loving overhead shots of the Cape Breton Highlands and the gentle, inoffensively Celtic soundtrack of the Rankins in the background leaves us with what "might be mistaken for a production of the Nova Scotia tourism bureau" (38).

The story of Margaret and the Glace Bay Miners' Museum is important in Cape

Breton's literary history because it articulates a Cape Breton that is urban, industrial, and poor, and where ethnic identity, though inescapable, is secondary to survival. Currie's Cape Bretoners are Highland Scots in a multicultural new world, where poverty and the concerns of a labour community cross ethnic lines. Currie doesn't seem to share MacLeod's concern about keeping one's heritage pure, though Currie might agree that Gaelic is a connecting force for all those with Scottish blood—the call of the bagpipes is strong. In “The Glace Bay Miners' Museum” Scottish culture may be trapped in the past, but it is accessible in the present for those who want to understand it, and for those who do, it is an empowering, not isolating knowledge. When Margaret learns of the courage in her family history, she is inspired to take action, and setting up a museum, while a commemoration of the past, keeps her interacting with and interpreting for those in the present. While MacLeod preserves by myth-making and reifying, Currie tries to gain strength from the stories behind the myths, and to use the spirit of those who went before to change the future. Unfortunately, *Margaret's Museum* subverts much of this discourse on identity and falls back on the myths of the Cape Breton Highlanders for easy contextualization of its love story. In doing so, the movie falls into the same difficulties that No Great Mischief does, and assumes the helplessness of a great, but fading, culture in the face of global industrialization.

### Chapter 3: A Postmodern Paradise: Lynn Coady's Cape Breton

Lynn Coady is part of a much younger generation of Cape Breton writers who have been raised exclusively in a modern Nova Scotia; strong infrastructure of roads and highways, federal grants for industry, heavy tourism and television have made the Island a much smaller, more accessible community than Sheldon Currie experienced in his childhood. Coady's writing accepts globalization as here to stay, and her Cape Breton identity is much less defined by ethnicity and the colonial moment of Highland families. The myths of Cape Breton identity are in some ways more difficult to untangle: they are at once clearly for tourists, and clearly present in her experience of the Island. In her short stories (collected in Play the Monster Blind) and her novel, Strange Heaven, Coady's answer to the dilemma of finding authentic community identity within the stereotypes is humour and an acceptance of absurdity. And in Lawrence Grossberg's terms, the identity of her cultural community moves beyond ethnicity to simple belonging: if you are present in the community, than you are part of it.

In Coady's writing, the struggle to come up with a new vision of cultural identity is played out in the gaze of the tourist, the outsider, the native returning with a new perspective. Again and again, narrators wrestle with where they belong, with whether it is possible to find a middle ground between living fully in a Cape Breton of poverty, alcoholism, and sometimes violence, a dreary circle from which there seems no escape, or leaving it completely behind for the foreign cultures of the rest of Canada. Leaving is not a perfect solution, and though she refers to characters who abandon home completely, Coady's own ties to family, stories, conversations, and humour are evidently too strong to do so herself. The narrator who has left, or who has arrived for the first time, enables Coady to constantly examine her culture

through different eyes. Whether the tourist or the prodigal daughter, each explores those traditional and stereotypical aspects sharply thrust up against the harshness that is contemporary life on the Island. Noticeably absent from most of her writing is the connection with a Scottish ancestral and communal past. In her postmodern Cape Breton, the sense of community seems to come out of relatively recent relationships and shared patterns of behaviour; she doesn't use the post-colonial strategy of establishing a small Gaelic stronghold against the larger oppressive, English-speaking, corporate world.

As in MacLeod, I have selected three stories from her collection for study, namely those whose themes are relevant, or which deal explicitly with Cape Breton identity. The opening and title story of her collection, "Play the Monster Blind," is told through the eyes of Bethany, a young woman who has met her fiancé, John, a displaced Cape Bretoner, somewhere else in Canada, and who travels to the Island to meet his family for the first time. The story's structure of outsider-narrator observing her family-to-be gives Coady a chance to explore Cape Breton identity at an intimate level. At the same time, the different family members allow her to present and undermine some stereotypes, while adding layers to characters who appear many times (in different guises) throughout her writing. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this story is the way all the characters, insiders and outsiders, accept many of the stereotypical elements of their relationships, while maintaining (or in Bethany's case, building) a strong sensitivity to and love for one another that speaks of genuine connection.

Coady structures "Play the Monster Blind" by playing with Bethany's tourist assumptions and expectations of the Cape Breton family she meets. Headings divide the story into sections: Drinking, Boxing, Swimming, Eating, Driving, and Fighting. All stereotypical

aspects of Island life, and all things that Bethany does differently than the Islanders. Already there is a marked, perhaps generational, difference between the headings Coady chooses and those that MacLeod or Currie might choose: noticeably absent are “mining,” “fishing” or anything about Celtic heritage. Coady outlines her list, then uses each chapter as an opportunity to set up and then undermine the outsider’s expectations.

“Drinking”, the first section, is unavoidably primary. Alcohol plays a major role throughout the story, as it does in most of Coady’s depictions of Cape Breton life, and though it had a more peripheral role in MacLeod’s and Currie’s writings, alcoholism is a common stereotype of Cape Bretoners. The first sentence of “Play the Monster Blind” is, “The father was drinking again, in celebration” (3). But once setting up our expectations of the boisterous and/or violent Cape Breton alcoholic, she immediately begins to tell a very personal, individual story. John doesn’t have memories of happy drunks sitting around telling stories of the old days. John’s memories are of “tooling around town in the green station wagon...watching his father drink...He would pull into the driveway, pause to smile at John, take a quick couple of swallows before reaching over to unbuckle the boy” (3). Much later in the story Bethany keeps asking “stupidly”—the only one who doesn’t understand the father’s habits—“Where’s your father?” and John explains that his father goes to drink behind closed doors, that “this was the only way the father had ever learned to drink--like a teenager sneaking swigs at a dance” (22). Again, rather than drinking being the social means to communal memory and passion (the way it is for Neil Currie in *Margaret’s Museum*), John’s father hides his drinking, and it becomes an insidious pattern of behaviour. During the last section of the story Bethany realizes, “epiphanic” (22), that the father is an alcoholic. No one has yet named the father’s problem, despite the disease’s obvious description in the story’s

opening paragraph. And despite the fact that it takes the outsider to use the word, John's response to her insight is deprecating; "Oh Christ, ... You don't know much" (22). His curt dismissal hurts Bethany's feelings, and this is the first instance that her outsider status is not a source of amusement but of separation. This moment of disconnection between Bethany and John provides the title of the last section, "Fighting". But the disconnection doesn't last—Coady's characters are rarely haunted, though emotional baggage is always present—and ultimately the misunderstanding has little impact on their relationship.

Coady's treatment of the father's drinking in this story is a good example of her technique. She invokes the stereotype for the outsider, then gets underneath it to its most personal, individual level. Bethany expects Cape Breton to be "a very welcoming place, rustic and simple and safe" (4), which, in some ways, it is. But that is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg, and later Bethany connects or names the stereotype involved and the Islanders respond by either trying to explain or realizing that the cultural subtleties are ungraspable for her. This recognition that the gap in understanding of the cultural difference is not bridgeable is not usually destructive. John and Bethany's moment of separation is simply a defining moment of the complexity involved. John understands the nature of his father's problems, and accepts that his father may not change. However, his father is part of a complex web of life and experiences that have made him who he is and so are celebrated, even though the outcome is not always pleasant. Coady's Cape Breton characters are often fully aware, on one level, of the limitations and pressures that confine them, but those limitations have become, over time, defining aspects of the community, and as such deserve celebration.

This is the message of the story and of the collection's title, "Play the Monster Blind." Bethany explains where the phrase comes from. She remembers that when Boris Karloff was

to play the monster in the movie *Frankenstein*, the filmmaker originally envisioned the monster as blind. Karloff played him with his arms outstretched and stumbling about. The filmmaker ultimately left out the storyline about the blindness, but used the footage of the monster and created the enduring image. Bethany remembers this when John's father is wandering toward them in the dark, drunk and moving in a similar way, but the real message of the phrase, "play the monster blind," seems directed elsewhere. In many ways the anecdote illuminates the circumstances Islanders find themselves in. Originally, there were reasons, important, logical reasons for the life led: drinking, fishing, boxing, storytelling, living off the land. But over time the reasons have faded from memory, even as the actions, and the perception of their intrinsic nature, endures. The stories told have become simulacra, and no longer reflect Cape Breton life. To the rest of the world, only the stereotype exists, and Coady, like Bethany, is trying to jog our collective memories. The issue of blindness is an interesting one in this light: as if the Islanders play up their trap for tourists, all the while knowing it isn't real.

In the same vein is the climax of the story, the other fight of the "Fighting" section. When John and Bethany return with the father, John's sister and brother are wrestling. Ann, a tiny, anorexic-bulimic young woman, has always been dominated by her physically powerful, wrestler brother Hugh. This time, though, much to Hugh's consternation, Ann crows, "I've uncovered the secret!" and every time Hugh tried to "manoeuvre Ann into one of his paralysing holds" Ann would manage to "slither away as though greased" (24). The secret, Ann shares excitedly, is to "move with the hold," to move wherever the attacker moves. Stop fighting adversarially, in other words, and simply pretend to give in. In doing so, paradoxically, the smaller partner is able to slither away unharmed. At a political level of cultural identity and

exploitation, this is an interesting suggested strategy!

Coady continues to use the narrative gaze of the outsider in the collection's final story, "Nice Place to Visit," whose title immediately triggers the rest of the saying, "but I wouldn't want to live there." In this case, the Cape Bretoner, Bess, is the outsider during a visit to the West Coast, where her cousin Meg is now living. In this story Coady plays with the very entrenched cultural theme of out-migration and the concepts of "home" and "away" (see Kulyk Keefer for more on these themes). Coady explores this issue throughout her writing, with contemporary characters migrating not just for work opportunities as MacLeod and Currie depict men in the mid-century needing to do, but for a whole variety of reasons. In Coady's writing the influence of the global village is clear: there is no tangible reason why one is unable to consider living at least anywhere in Canada, and there is no longer a sense that Highland Scots leave because of an ethnic need for adventure. In "Nice Place to Visit," as in No Great Mischief, we get a perspective from "away," rather from those who have been left behind. In contrast to MacLeod, though, Coady's narrators are women, and we thus get a nice balance of reasons why women might leave Cape Breton, and the difficulties they experience in doing so.

Bess admires her cousin Meg for having "wriggled out from underneath a houseful of backwoods brothers" and for becoming "strong and assertive in a way that was still quite alien to Bess" (212). Coady emphasizes Bess' sense of being a stranger in a strange land. Meg grew up close to Bess' family in rural Cape Breton, and as the cousins get reacquainted Meg talks about Cape Breton as a trap, and about her new life on the West Coast as freedom. Bess has mixed feelings about Meg and her boyfriend Lyle's life, but Meg is able to articulate things that Bess is able only to think. Meg, as Bess is forming the thoughts, invites Bess to

move out to the coast, to embrace the freedom. She says

You're thinking how hard it would be... Listen—it's not hard. I'm here. It seems so hard and then you get out here and wonder how in the name of God you were able to tolerate that hell-hole you were in for so many years. It changes everything. (214)

Bess is mildly offended, thinking that the hardest thing in her life so far was to move out of her parents' house and into a little apartment with her son, Dylan, and that she is not in a "hell-hole." But Meg rephrases her thoughts and emphasizes that, "you think you're stuck and you think you can do no better. Then you come out here, and the whole world opens up" (215). And Bess starts to wonder at the possibility of life outside her insular community back home. While Meg and Bess are "away," they associate Cape Breton with isolation, and a life already determined, from which deviation seems next to impossible.

As the story proceeds, Bess marvels at her own assumptions of the power of going "away." Though her small son doesn't understand why she needed a break from him, Bess imagined that going away was a magical experience that immediately produced a person who was "normal," that Meg had "wrenched herself away from the family of boys, flown across the continent and opened herself up like a flower, somehow. That was how. Merely by going away" (217). Once arrived "away," Bess thinks back to her life in Cape Breton as "grim" and "monotonous," and reflects on the cycle of poverty: that whoever was working bought the booze, and that "it never occurred to them to do anything with their money except drink, there was so little of it" (217). Out here, "as the clean, wet air and looming monster-trees and sun and clouds and water worked on her being, she could almost imagine forgetting she needed a drink some evening" (217). And indeed this is how Bess imagines Meg has escaped—by

saving the money she would have spent on alcohol.

The implications of Meg and Bess's reflections on their home, now that they are across the country from it, are less than pleasant. Far from being the idyllic Celtic Island the tourists arrive to experience each year, Meg and Bess remember their home colored by poverty, dank dark bars, excessive drinking and lives void of the possibility of change. To escape a cycle of young pregnancy, unsuccessful relationships, minimum wage jobs if you are among the fortunate few, seems impossible. And the landscape so admired in the tourist literature gets a bare mention: Meg says, "But there's sun and water and trees back home," and Bess replies, "But where?" (217) When so intensely focused on family and work and daily survival, Bess has had little opportunity to appreciate the beauty that is around her.

Bess marvels at the difference in culture and perception between the East and West coasts when she and Meg go exploring and visit the nineteenth-century Castleman Family Farm. The farm turns out to be an abandoned one, with little left save a plaque identifying the field as the tourist attraction they were looking for. The empty buildings are all still there, with their various antique equipment. This may seem a normal enough attraction on Saturna Island, but to Meg and Bess the park merely highlights their own strange culture. They know that "back home" no one would have made a park out of something so normal:

Nobody had ever biked out to their parent' hundred-year-old houses for curiosity's sake and peered in the windows. And the reason was that there were people still living in them, which didn't make things as quaint as when they were long abandoned. (224)

Both women experience this realization of their own difference as depressing. Meg, in particular, has worked very hard to build a life on the West Coast and to construct an identity

outside Cape Breton, and is unnerved by the sudden understanding that she still perceives things through an East Coast gaze. Her sense of history is very different; her ideas about what is important enough to put on display in a museum do not include something as mundane as a hundred-year-old house.

In terms of the Nova Scotia tourist industry, there is irony in this situation on many levels. Coady's comment shows that tourists are apparently not interested in the mundane but authentic way of life of contemporary inhabitants, only in the constructed, artificial sites that are safely void of people, and therefore about which "anything might be surmised" (225). At the same time Coady suggests that history in Cape Breton is not something to be put on display as if long dead, but in fact something that is still very much present in the day to day lives of those who live there. Bess and Meg live in those homes inhabited by their ancestors generations back, and are surrounded by what others might term antiques.

Despite Bess' awe at the beginning of the story, her visit soon deteriorates. Regardless of how beautiful the scenery, the people inhabiting the West Coast apparently have as much emotional baggage as those "back home." Meg and her "grown-up" relationship is as dysfunctional as she describes her mother and alcoholic father's; Lyle's best friend is a gay man, Wills, who is close to Meg and Lyle because he's in love with Lyle too. And though she feels very small-town and naïve in comparison in her identity to Meg's new cosmopolitan persona, Bess ultimately decides that she would rather be home

in their apartment on the grey street, sitting on the second-hand couch with the enormous faded afghan on it, knitted seventy-odd years ago by Bess's father's mother. Dylan on her lap, the two of them watching "Star Trek" repeats after supper, smell of toast and macaroni all around. (226)

Though Bess is impressed with the opportunities and sense of freedom that comes from moving “away,” she realizes that for herself, being “home,” rooted in the familiar and in that which connects her to her own personal history is more important. At the same time as she chooses Cape Breton, though, nowhere are the reasons to return traditionally given. She does not feel the need to return to a Celtic haven, nor to a particular kind of natural beauty, nor to a simpler, more peaceful life. In many ways the life she visits out West is the late twentieth-century ideal of the simple life: living on a houseboat on one of the Gulf Islands surrounded by a spectacular environment and needing to work sporadically in the high-tech field, never worrying about money. Instead Bess simply longs for her own small corner of the universe, the place she knows she belongs: in her tiny apartment with her son and her few important momentos, her family a free phone call away with their familiar, if restrictive, perspectives on the world.

Bess and her family show up in another story, one that gives a glimpse of daily life in more rural Cape Breton as well as some useful points of comparison with MacLeod and Currie: “A Great Man’s Passing.” The story takes place before Bess’s cousin Meg moves west, and occurs around the time of Bess’ grandfather’s death. Like Currie’s Margaret before her, Bess learns much about her family at this time of mourning, and as various people from within the community and out gather at the wake. The story also provides insight into the daily life that takes place outside of these moments of crisis, and some of the new dynamics between the “outsiders” that have bought property in Cape Breton to find the peaceful life and the community’s longtime residents.

“Great Man’s Passing” reveals the interconnectedness of the different stratas of Cape Breton life today, where there are highways and roads between nearly all towns, villages and

cities, and years of family migration around the province mean that Margaret MacNeil's experience of "country relatives" she's never met is no longer the norm. Families move, fragmenting to different parts of Cape Breton and between different economic levels, and then reunite or lose jobs and the dynamic changes again. When Bess was small her immediate family lived in town, and her paternal grandparents lived on a farm where she would spend her summers. Because of the family ties to the area, she grew up knowing the rural families; her mother would visit the Sloanes, for instance, bringing them hand-me-down clothes and gossip, and Bess "knew the name of every single child living in that house" (98). There was a rural community that Bess, through her parents and grandparents, was a part of, despite residing elsewhere with her parents who had moved for work.

Bess' father owned a hotel/restaurant in town and became "the kind of citizen who sits on town councils" (103), but eventually he lost the business and the family moved back to the farm where her grandparents were now aging and needed help anyway. In the meantime Bess has had her son Dylan and keeps house until her father finds her a job at the local hotel/restaurant/pub. A wealthy American named Rufus Bank came to Cape Breton looking for the simple life and bought the "Bonnie Prince Charlie Inn." Ruf and Bess' father fish together and her father talks Ruf into giving her a job. Once working as a bartender she becomes reacquainted with those families, also now grown, that she knew as a child. The dynamic between these different groups and Bess finding her way between them provides the basic tension for the story. Ultimately, when Bess' grandfather dies, all these groups and then some come together to visit and mourn.

Rufus Bank could have been pulled directly out of Ian McKay's research. Having made his fortune in the States, he has likely visited Nova Scotia on holidays over the years, as

he calls Cape Breton “paradise,” and says “I’ve wanted to live here all my life” (100). He calls himself “Ruf” and renames the bar “Red Ruf’s,” because “he used to have red hair and he noticed that everyone ‘around here’ had nicknames and that was one of the things he loved about the place” (101). The province has been marketed as a paradise that is unspoiled by development (as long as you don’t go to Sydney), with tight-knit communities of happy Scots who sing and dance and drink. Ruf is typical of those who not only want to leave their busy lives for a peaceful corner of the world, but who also want to belong to the community. Where residents might inherit nicknames from family, gain them from significant events in their lives, or be given a nickname to identify them relative to others in the community with the same name (as happens with the Alexander MacDonalds in No Great Mischief), Ruf gives himself one in order to instantly fit in. Where in a MacLeod story residents might see this as symptomatic of a dying culture—a piece of history that now exists only at the level of imitation—Coady’s fictional community doesn’t seem perturbed. Bess simply realized quickly that “the best way to endear yourself to the American was to refer to him affectionately as Red Ruf, as often as you could get away with” (101).

In fact, though the community does gently mock his tourist-based assumptions, and occasionally lie to him to maintain his sense of being in “authentic” Cape Breton, they don’t seem to mind perpetuating Ruf’s illusions, they accept his presence as part of their community, and they appreciate his economic contributions. Ruf came to Bess’ father to go trout fishing and so he took Ruf to a place close to her father’s gaspreaux trap. “Everyone but the American knew there wouldn’t be any trout, but they also knew he would be just as satisfied if he caught even one bony gaspreaux, which he did, and he was” (100). The residents know what they must do in order to keep the tourists happy, and in this community

anyway, there seems to be an acceptance of the need for these outsiders to keep the economy afloat, and little resentment about it. In return, they get a decent man running the only pub that stays open year round, and someone who has money to invest in the community, offering Bess a job, and getting the latest sound system equipment. They seem to consider this a fair trade, and Ruf represents little of the “outside threat” that was the main focus of a story like MacLeod’s “The Boat.”

The one stereotype that does seem to hold true, according to this story, is ironically one that Ruf is unaware of: that everyone in the community is in some way kin to everyone else. Whether this is a truism of many small populations or merely a stereotype of rural Cape Breton, Bess is a cousin of the Sloanes, her cousin Meg’s family and, apparently, many other families in the area. When Ruf becomes suspicious of two Sloane brothers, Cookie and Dougal, who have been involved in fistfights on more than one occasion, Bess says coolly, “they’re my cousins” (109). Ruf is immediately contrite, worried that he has made a terrible faux pas in his adopted home. And “Bess smiled, setting herself up with a beer. Ruf had yet to understand that everybody was cousins” (109). Again, the locals are able to use their privileged inside information to their own advantage, keeping “outsiders” just outside the loop enough that there is advantage to be gained.

Coady rarely brings traditional Celtic culture into her stories. In “Great Man’s Passing,” though, she does provide a glimpse of the role that heritage may play in this rural life today—no longer isolated from the outside world. As is typical in her writing, when the Gaelic language and culture do come to light, they are the domain of the elderly, the grandparents, who are often portrayed as senile and very odd. Bess describes her grandparents as “the ghouls,” and their house as “the funeral home.” When her grandfather is

taken to hospital, Bess comes home to find her Grandmother even more irrational than usual.

“Poor Iain,” said Gramma to nobody. “*Croc a nian, scat a nean*” — which was a song about salt cod that she recently had been mistaking for the Our Father.

(110)

This is the only mention of Gaelic in the story, and its use implies several things. Only Gramma uses the old language, and she uses it badly and with no sense of understanding anymore. Gaelic is not only the domain of the old, but the out of touch with reality. Like the simulacra of the nicknames, the language which once had meaning in each word now has no relevance of its actual meaning but only in the comfort of its presence and remembered sound. At the same time, Bess, or at least Coady, does know the meaning of the words and understands this paradox enough to point it out. So the Gaelic has at least survived to the present generation through songs. Where young Sal in MacLeod’s “The Tuning of Perfection” knows the songs phonetically but can’t assign any meaning to the words, here Bess at least knows the song and its general meaning. Coady, in her turn, knows enough Gaelic to be able to write down the words as part of the short story, and as a woman under thirty, this suggests that something of her connection to traditional culture remains, regardless of its peripheral presence in the overall narrative.

There is the same feeling that Coady knows more about her Gaelic roots than she is telling when she describes her grandfather’s wake. Despite a generation’s passing, there is not much difference between Coady’s description and Margaret’s in The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum of the wake for her father and brother. When Bess’ grandfather dies, Mary Kate Sloane, whose children Bess serves at the pub, arrives with three of her children at the door with a van full of food. Bess’ extended family—uncles and great-uncles—had arrived while

her grandfather was sick, and the house starts to get crowded. Along with the food, Mary Kate brings bottles of alcohol, and gradually the house fills with people from all over the community, drinking, eating and talking. The touch of Gaelic tradition, which in Currie's novel Margaret is familiar with, despite not knowing Gaelic songs or having seen the bagpipes, is the fiddler at the wake. In this story, Bess' father hired a fiddler to "sit in the corner with a drink at his feet and play mournful Scottish tunes" (114). And it is some measure of who has died that the fiddler is not the boy down the street but "a celebrity of sorts and most of the guests considered it something of an event, having him there" (114). The celebrity status, perhaps naturally in the evolution of Cape Breton culture, is conferred because of a mix of local and national recognition of the sort that Helen Creighton provided. Though he has a local reputation, respect is also given because "someone from Ontario had once included him in a book of Maritime folklore and now he was widely considered a sage" (114).

As at Margaret's father's and brother's wake, relatives also arrive from out of town—in this case Bess is reacquainted with Uncle Roddie and his children who have grown up in Ontario. These cousins had visited the Cape Breton family farm in the summers, and Bess "could remember worshipping them their clothes and cigarettes ... they drank beer and were exotic" (115). The cousins raised outside of Cape Breton are independent and free-thinking, and have no qualms arguing with Bess' father about politics. Bess comments that though these are interesting members of her family, they are still, in some ways, outsiders. They do tourist-like things during their visits, which means doing things they associate with not being tourists: "They would ... sit in the kitchen with their Keith's and start all their sentences with 'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,' and 'Lord t'undering Jesus.' They would play their Rankin Family

and Rita MacNeil tapes” (116). Despite her mild mocking, though, Bess and Coady let these relatives off the hook, as they do with Red Ruf, because they do have a genuine relationship with the community. Bess recognizes that they knew her grandfather in ways that she didn’t, though she is a little unsettled by their comments that her grandfather was “a great man ... but a simple man” (116), when she who lived with him for years saw him as just old.

Where Currie and MacLeod have more specific agendas, Coady doesn’t pass judgement on anyone in this story. She gives us a picture of contemporary Cape Breton life whose rich daily culture contains interactions between all those groups who have previously been so rigidly defined—Catholic/ Protestant, urban/rural, insider/outsider. While she recognizes their categories, she accepts them as part of the present whole and enjoys the humour in the natural misunderstandings and stereotypes true, false and mythic. Through all of her stories, the Cape Breton cultural community is defined as everyone it contains, and the differences, ethnic and otherwise, are noted as differences within the community, not differences that distinguish groups from one another.

Coady continues to explore the quirks of the Cape Breton community in her compelling novel, Strange Heaven. One of the most notable aspects of the novel for our purposes is that Coady tells the story of Bridget Murphy and her family, who have an Irish name, but a Scottish grandmother. Somewhere along the line in the Murphy family, the line between Scottish and Irish has become blurred and somewhat indistinguishable. What Tom Hodd describes as the “repressed Catholic world of industrial Cape Breton” (93) this time contains characters like Father Boyle, rather than only MacDonald. Coady doesn’t make too much of these distinctions, anymore than contemporary Islanders likely do, but along with her female protagonists, this difference between her characters and MacLeod’s or Currie’s is

dramatic and flies in the face of accepted stereotype. That said, in Coady's fictional small town there is no stated identity linked to any one ethnic or religious group, and we can assume that although Bridget's family is distinctive, it is neither atypical nor necessarily one of a homogenous many; this town is as varied a mix of backgrounds as was Currie's 1940s Glace Bay.

The novel is the story of teen-aged Bridget's life after giving birth to a baby she gives up for adoption. When the novel opens, Bridget is safely ensconced in a psychiatric ward, suffering from depression after the birth. The novel is divided into two sections: her time at the hospital, and the time around Christmas during which she returns home and tries to cope with the ways in which she has been changed while deciding to which degree she might want to re-integrate into the community. These two sections are useful for examining Coady's take on Cape Breton life, as they provide an extension of the insider/outsider perspectives offered in her short stories: the sections chart the ways in which being an insider or outsider is often a state of mind, a choice, rather than simply circumstantial.

More than her pregnancy, Bridget's time away in Halifax, time spent with a wild variety of young people who are each damaged in some capacity, seems to affect a major shift in her perspective and understanding of her home and of herself. While she is away Bridget is an outsider; her mother, brother and friends come to visit and she reflects on their personalities and relationships in a new context. Outside of the usual teenage perspective on her parents at home, Bridget discovers new sides to her mother, who once swung from a chandelier and can still act like a teenager herself. Bridget grows in her relationship with her brother and finds comfort with her aunt and uncle in Halifax. In her time at the hospital she also begins to try and translate her culture to outsiders like her roommate Mona, who is from

Toronto, and from a background of wealthy urban life. Mona and Bridget baffle each other; for instance Mona thought “Catholics were like Druids and nobody really was one any more” (13). But in the boredom of the ward, and in the need to make connections and heal, they tell each other stories of their lives, and Bridget begins to gain a different understanding of her life at home and what’s possible away from it. As her physician tells her, “you’re almost eighteen...You can do whatever you like. The world is your oyster” (17). Bridget has never really encountered this idea before, the idea that she can make her own decisions about what to do with her life rather than simply following others or falling into circumstances, including her pregnancy.

Bridget starts to gain control of her life while in the ward, gaining power and also becoming, inadvertently, an insider. She holds herself apart from the other teens in the ward, trying her best not to become involved in the various therapies programmed by the nurses and social workers. But despite her best efforts, she does build relationships, begins to give voice to some of her anger, and starts to take action. Unfortunately, most of her growth takes place at the expense of Byron, a nerdy young man who constantly seeks attention. Bridget begins to exercise power in the ward primarily by belittling and refusing to acknowledge him, and succeeds in controlling his behaviour where other residents have failed. In gaining that power she also gains status and friendship in the ward, and begins to participate in the hospital community. That participation leads her to begin to consider broader possibilities for her life if she remains outside her small-town home. To her dismay, at Christmas she is released from the Halifax hospital, and she returns home.

At home Bridget goes through several phases of reintegration into and reflection upon her old life and community. She realizes that the primary roles and behaviours her teenaged

community has acquired serve one purpose: escape. She notes the irony of her situation now that she has returned home: she no longer wants to participate in the life she led before getting pregnant, so when she first returns home she leaves the house as little as possible. Her friends, especially Heidi, pester her constantly to come out with them, and Bridget holds out as long as possible. And this leaves her at an impasse, the same one she had been stuck at before she left.

She could never get out of the house enough, and for a while it seemed as if Mark was her only way out the house. Then it became the case that she couldn't get away from Mark fast enough and the house was the only place where he couldn't get to her. (123)

After being home for a while Bridget realizes that, in her own mind she has become an outsider, and that she wants to keep it that way. But as time goes by she finds it more and more difficult to resist the pull of her peers and the boredom of hiding in her house with her crazy family. And she starts to believe that “it would always be hopeless and it didn't matter what she did. There would always be people, inside and outside, always at her”(123). Bridget never does really find a new balance for her new self, and the novel ends before she is able to make any dramatic changes. But there is no question that she has grown and changed, and that hopefully she will take action.

Coady is careful in how her novel portrays Cape Breton life. Though ultimately Bridget feels somewhat trapped, the same way that Bess and Meg do in the short stories, Coady celebrates life in this small town with humour, joy, and much love. Bridget's family is unique, to say the least—in her home lives her mother, her father (a craftsman and a very funny parody of the Nova Scotia folk artist) and brother, her father's mentally disabled brother

and their senile mother—but there is no derision or real dislike, and in fact there is often real caring and tenderness. Bridget’s friends aren’t well-treated, but nor are they judged. They are exposed as hurting, vulnerable and human, and no different really than those teens Bridget lives with in the psychiatric ward.

But Coady doesn’t sugar-coat Cape Breton life either. There is unemployment, too much drinking and smoking, and there is desperate, small-town violence in the murder mentioned on the first page of the novel when Archie Shearer kills Jennifer MacDonnell—two young people that are neighbours of Bridget’s and close to her age. But these things are also not portrayed as a society crumbling, rather they are simply things that continue to happen in many parts of the country and have always happened. Coady steadily and consistently debunks the idea that small-town Cape Breton is the paradise in the glossy tourist brochures, even as she celebrates the community’s uniqueness. Bridget’s Uncle Albert points out that when he was a young man he was surrounded by vets returning from the war and doing all kinds of similarly senseless things; he is not at all shocked that terrible things still happen today. The CBC reports that the murder “was because of television, and music, and videos. It was getting as bad as the city” (11). But Albert’s reply is “Horseshit” (11).

Coady also walks a fine line when comparing Cape Breton to other places in Canada, and plays with the whole notion of successful escape. Bridget becomes friends with Alan Voorland, a mill technician from Guelph who is older than she and her friends, who seems exotic and larger than life, and who is in turn fascinated by Bridget’s life. Alan and Bridget’s conversations reveal the contemporary translation of cultures. During these conversations, Bridget reflects that for “the first time she experienced herself and her surroundings as something other than commonplace. For Alan they were positively alien” (33). The first

thing Coady has Alan asking about is Bridget's grandmother, especially as it relates to Gaelic culture. Bridget hasn't paid much attention to her grandmother's heritage, so she teaches Alan a few curses. "Alan asked if she was speaking in Irish Gaelic or Scottish Gaelic and Bridget didn't know" (33). For Alan the question is anthropological, he has been raised with the Helen Creighton image of the East Coast, but to Bridget these are not distinctions she thinks about. Her blended Irish-Scottish (and perhaps other ethnicities) family is the generic contemporary "Celtic," and like MacLeod and Currie glumly predicted, the distinctions between cultures have become irrelevant.

For his part, Alan shares endless stories of his middle-class Ontario life, which is equally foreign to Bridget; he "told her about his intelligent and interesting friends and all the quirky, whimsical adventures they had together," (36) most of which involve trips to the lake, the university campus, the cabin. He is lonely in Cape Breton, and he and Bridget form a bond around their shared desire to escape the small community—they both fall in between the conventionally defined social groups. Alan ultimately returns home, and he and Bridget keep in touch for a while, but their telephone conversations don't hold the same connection when they don't need each other in order to escape. Eventually the relationship doesn't fit their new circumstances, and it ends. But Coady shows us that Alan is not fabulously happy once free from Cape Breton life, and in fact his life in Ontario with his girlfriend and parties that sounded glamorous when he described it to Bridget becomes mundane once he has returned to it. Just because a life is "away" doesn't inherently make it better—the same message Bess discovers in "Nice Place to Visit." Coady continues to show us that communities are not better or worse from one another, they are simply different.

In his review of Strange Heaven, Tom Hodd writes that the novel "repels the regional

idyll of Avonlea” (92), and Coady does indeed repel the ideal of the simple Cape Breton life of the Folk on many levels. Bridget’s life is far from simple, and her struggles with “the mental and spiritual boundaries established by her community” (Attridge 108) reveal the difficulties with living in the “perfect” small town region within the global village. Bridget’s small community has all the problems of modern life: few jobs and those at huge national chains like Tim Horton’s or Home Hardware, poverty and few options for life within the community and therefore temporary escapes like alcoholism, as well as more serious consequences like teen-age pregnancy and murder. But the geographic isolation of rural Cape Breton means that the idea of broader possibilities—even college in Halifax—seem radical to Bridget. At the same time the only hope of escape seems to be to leave; the tradition that began in the 1920s and the cultural associations with “home” versus “away,” that nebulous place that simply is everything that is not here, is alive and well at the end of the twentieth century.

Where MacLeod and Currie seem to suggest that one way out of the cycle is the empowerment that comes with knowing the stories and songs of your ethnic heritage, holding on to a cultural identity that grounds you in the middle of the modern chaos, Coady provides no such suggestion. In fact she seems to have no thought at all that there is a way out of the cycle. Her short stories explore the possibilities of escape into the freedom of the wider postmodern world and away from the constraints of Cape Breton life, but those characters that do leave find that cultural identity is not something easily shed. In fact Bridget Murphy shows up in a short story narrated by Alan Voorland, “Look and Pass On,” but even there, where she’s escaping to university in Ontario, she is not measurably happier or more free. In terms of cultural heritage, the distinctions between Scottish, Irish, English or any other ethnic

identity seems to have disappeared, except from stereotype, and melded into an amorphous sense of maritime life characterized by its dark humour, distinctive accent, and poverty.

But Coady's stories carry much more optimism than MacLeod's or Currie's. Despite her postmodern assumptions that there is no ethnic homogeneity or possibility of ideal solutions, Coady's work is full of celebration for the uniqueness of her characters and their plight. She herself has "escaped," and lives in Vancouver, but she has written extensively about the Cape Breton mentality that she cannot leave behind. Most of her characters are damaged in one way or another, but she always includes her narrators in that condition, and so the portrayals are sympathetic, humourous and poignant. Outsiders and tourists are sometimes welcome, sometimes intrusive, but all an accepted part of the community mix. Most importantly, all her characters are human, regardless of economic or cultural backgrounds, and Coady's contemporary resignation is that there is no better or worse place to be. As her novel's title implies, Cape Breton may be a "strange heaven," but it is hers.

### Conclusion

In the September 2000 issue of the local Nova Scotia newspaper *shunpiking*, Paul MacDougall of the University College of Cape Breton reviews Coady's Play the Monster Blind, and compares her work to that of Alistair MacLeod and Sheldon Currie. He writes

Lynn Coady's characters are in some ways similar to Sheldon Currie's minus the quirkiness. If you're looking for romanticized, gothic stories of Cape Breton, stick with MacLeod, because he is the master, and his Island is real, but in a different way. MacLeod removes the warts, but leaves the pain and frustration, and doesn't leave you laughing. Coady on the other hand goes to great lengths to add back the warts and makes us laugh at the same time. (22)

All three of these writers read together capture something of what it is to be a Cape Bretoner today, and respond to MacKay's call for a new articulation of Nova Scotian identity. Though MacLeod articulates what is essentially an imagined culture and ethnic identity, he does it so well that he forms a bridge between the state-constructed invention and that part of the myth that is true. He gives a voice to the way Highland Cape Bretoners might wish they were. Currie concentrates on filling in the gaps in the more historical record, giving the history a human voice, and like Coady, reveling in the ordinary which is present in any historical moment. Coady simply enjoys the irony present when the myth meets reality, and she explores the psychological struggle that necessarily ensues when the human longing for identity and belonging require ironic distance to function in Cape Breton today.

Traditional forms of Canadian nation-building (primarily those that took place from the inter-war period through the 1960s) have come at a cost not only to visible minorities—whether Native, immigrant, or female, as has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere—but also

to those commonly seen as part of the “Centre.” Cape Breton Islanders are primarily white and some of the earliest settlers in Canada, but they have nonetheless often been marginalized in much the same language as those excluded by race: lazy, drunk, looking for a handout, trapped in a poverty that they refuse (by choice) to get out of. Equally, the struggle for a place in the national identity profile selected “Scottish” as the representative culture of Nova Scotia, with Cape Breton the most concentrated, and therefore most representative region. But this constructed “Scottish” identity of course effectively erases dozens of other important ethnicities in the region, in particular French-Acadian, Aboriginal, English (strangely enough), Irish, and other smaller groups: Ukrainian, Polish, Lebanese.

There is a constant tension in this region between the popular but somewhat mythical identity of the Highland Gaelic-speaking immigrants who consider themselves part of a colonized (in Scotland by England), threatened ethnic group—their language and traditional rural culture struggling to survive in North American mass culture—and the history of this group as colonizers of the area themselves. Some Highland Scots fled Britain during the late eighteenth-century Clearances, came to the East Coast and recreated their kinship and communal structures that were largely untouched until the major industrialization and modernization of infrastructure from the late nineteenth-century onwards, and their story has become artificially representative of Cape Breton’s history.

That group has felt under threat from North American mass culture for decades, and MacLeod defends his community from that threat by creating a Cape Breton that is cohesive and homogenous “in the hope that its undivided (if specious) unity will empower it against the apparent seamlessness of the hegemonic discourse” (Lawson 28). Unfortunately, in creating this sense of ancient, unique identity, MacLeod in these stories ignores the Highlander’s

colonial role and traps his beloved Gaelic culture in the past, with little hope of renewal. Faced with the same threat from industrialization and mass culture, Sheldon Currie responds by re-educating his characters about their past, exploring the individual family histories of Cape Breton, rather than adapting the more general mythology. That knowledge is empowering, and inspires Currie's characters to action and hope in the face of monumental opposition—whether that action be a labour strike or an attempt to preserve the essence of life after tragic death.

Both these writers use strategies typical of Second-World writers to define and defend Cape Breton culture from homogenizing outside influences, invoking traditional language, song, and story. They choose to define their community through the colonial moment, using the stories of immigration and settlement to show the common ancestry and values that can be traced to the present. Their writing gives voice to the Gaelic culture in Cape Breton which has been overlooked in the writings of historians—whether the unified Canadian nationalism of the 1960s which ended Maritime history at Confederation (see Forbes), or the constructed Scottish representations which created a simulacrum of Scottish culture removed from the communities where the symbols and traditions had resonant meaning. MacLeod and Currie have an agenda of preserving Gaelic culture and documenting traditions, language and music which parallels the resistance of other post-colonial groups.

But Lynn Coady moves beyond this kind of post-colonialism. Her Cape Breton has ties to these ideas and images, but she experiences a place today that is not exclusively Gaelic, and where North American mass culture is an entrenched presence. Rather than resist by either writing it out or taking political action, Coady chooses to simply show her community as it is—full of irony and incongruity. In poking fun at the stereotypes, and accepting all

those who live in the community as voices in the narrative, Coady manages to convey a great sense of optimism about the future of her community, and avoids getting caught in the colonial binary of oppressor and oppressed. In Coady's stories all the various subaltern identities (variances of religion, ethnicity, age, homeland), rather than struggling with hybridity, are simply accepted as part of an immediate community that contains them all by their shared present circumstances. In Lawrence Grossberg's terms, the post-colonial model is used as "transformative practice," to illustrate the "singular becoming of a community" (88). This vision of cultural identity may well be a way out of the catch-22 that MacLeod finds himself in, and may be well-suited to the contemporary Canadian, multicultural reality.

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