

**“The circumscribed geography of home”:  
Island Identity in the Fiction of  
Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston**

Laurie Brinklow

Dr. Brent MacLaine

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Island Studies

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## **Abstract**

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by Laurie Brinklow  
University of Prince Edward Island

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Brent MacLaine, Department of English, University of Prince Edward Island (Chair)  
Dr. Jean Mitchell, Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Prince Edward Island  
Dr. Jeanette Lynes, Department of English, St. Francis Xavier University

This thesis addresses issues of islandness and island identity in the fiction of Cape Breton’s Alistair MacLeod and Newfoundland’s Wayne Johnston. Through careful readings of their fiction, with supplementary evidence culled from biographical and secondary sources, the thesis shows that their work is profoundly influenced by their childhood experiences; that these authors have been “imprinted” by growing up on an island; and that, as a result, both authors bear a strong island identity which inspires and infuses their writings. The thesis opens by introducing themes that pervade islandness, and proceeds to set MacLeod’s and Johnston’s fiction in the context of the western traditions of island and regionalist literature, followed by a discussion of how identity is formulated. In three chapters the thesis explores the theme of boundedness: physically or geographically, in the ways that the ocean’s boundary defines a character, as evidenced primarily in Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and MacLeod’s “Island”; psychologically, in the ways that childhood and family affect an individual growing up on an island, as evidenced primarily in Johnston’s *The Story of Bobby O’Malley* and MacLeod’s “The Boat” and “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”; and emotionally, in the ways that social influences affect feelings of belonging and exile, as evidenced primarily in Johnston’s *The Custodian of Paradise* and MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief*. The thesis concludes with a reaffirmation of the influence of islandness and island identity in the fiction of Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston.

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To be born on an island's to be sure  
You are native with a habitat.  
Growing up on one's good training  
For living in the world, on a planet.

—From “I, Milton Acorn,” Milton Acorn (92)

**Writing Islandness**

Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston, two of Atlantic Canada's premier novelists and short story writers, have much in common. Both have strong connections to the islands of their childhood, MacLeod to Cape Breton where he spent most of his early and teenage years, and Johnston to Newfoundland where he was born and raised. Both left their islands as young adults to pursue university education in mainland cities. Both have spent the majority of their adult lives “away” while professing a strong attachment to their home islands. And both have set most of their fiction on or near Cape Breton and Newfoundland, the islands they call “home.”

MacLeod's and Johnston's fiction has been directly affected by their “islandness.” Their themes are as deep as the Atlantic ocean that edges their islands. They take their inspiration from all that surrounds them, from their physical landscapes and storied histories to the music of the local dialects. Because of the bounded nature of their geography, their characters' thoughts and feelings and imaginations and souls have been shaped or imprinted by their islands. Thus islandness underpins how their characters view their island and the world, giving them a distinct

“island identity.”

The fact that their works are so obviously island-placed does much to create a sense of islandness through their narrative, imagery, and thematic preoccupations. The major theme is that of boundedness—physical, psychological, and emotional—and from that theme flow the issues that have become part of the “island studies” lexicon, such as vulnerability and resilience; leaving and staying; routes and roots; tradition and modernity; dependency and autonomy; belonging and exile; prison and paradise. Other issues include limited or lack of choice, the importance of ancestry and inheritance, as well as relationships with the environment, the sea, and the mainland. Pete Hay writes, “The very boundedness of islands makes them different. Physical boundedness conduces to psychological distinctiveness because it promotes clearer, ‘bounded’ identities,” (“Poetics” 553) and just as ecological and economic stresses are more acute on islands than on mainlands, so are the psychological. Boundedness, he says, “reduces options” (553). This “acuteness” and boundedness, then, suggest an exaggerated and distilled nature of islandness that sharpens the tension, delineates the characters, and hones the imagery, making the works distinctive in their utter clarity.

David Weale in his essay “Islandness” defines islandness as an island community’s “mythology, imagination, its very soul [which] has been sculpted and colored by its geographical circumstances,” circumstances that include a topographical shoreline as well as a “psychological shoreline that has been internalized in the consciousness of Islanders, and informs every aspect of life” (82). This psychological shoreline is what contains islanders and sets them apart, delimits and defines them. It is not something of which islanders are necessarily conscious; rather, it is internal, guiding their thoughts and emotions and actions, remaining with them throughout their lives, even when they leave.

But do MacLeod and Johnston share this vision of islandness? What evidence is there, in the insights that may be gleaned through a close reading of their fiction through the lens of islandness, to suggest that growing up on islands can profoundly influence what they write about and how they write it, that they have, indeed, been “imprinted” by their islands? And how does this pertain to “island identity”?

Through careful readings of their works, with supplementary evidence culled from biographical material (e.g., memoir, film clips, media interviews) and secondary sources (scholarly articles and reviews), this thesis will set out to show that the writings of Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston are profoundly influenced by their childhood experiences; that these authors have, indeed, been “imprinted” by growing up on an island; and that, as a result, both authors bear a strong island identity which inspires and infuses their writings. Both writers have an acute sense of place that stems from growing up on their islands. They both write from within a bounded island existence while being universally understood. Of MacLeod’s writing, one reviewer says, “I felt that I had been breathing the cold clear air of Cape Breton and been granted an insight into a part of human history” (Impac). In his review of *Colony*, Verne Clemence says, “I’ve never been to Newfoundland, but at about the halfway point in this book I began to smell the smells, hear the lilt, and experience a sense of the fierce attachment Newfoundlanders feel to their home province no matter where they live” (Clemence). Readers’ reactions tend to be visceral, eliciting emotions that connect to their own hearts and psyches and understanding of universal truths.

## **Writing Islands**

For centuries, islands have inspired writers to explore themes in works that hold mythic power

over readers' imaginations. Many of these creations have become an integral part of the literary canon, Homer's *Odyssey* being one of the earliest. Odysseus overcomes obstacles on his island odyssey to get home to his own island of Ithaka. As characters such as Odysseus journey, writes Stephanos Stephanides, "the boundaries between self and the other continually shift" (12). On such quests, one must be resilient, if one wants to adapt to continually shifting boundaries and attain one's goal—which, in the case of Odysseus, is to get back to his island home of Ithaka. The vulnerability of islands is showcased in Plato's story of Atlantis, where the entire island is destroyed when it is "swallowed by the sea" (20) because the gods wish to punish its inhabitants for "*hybris* and the loss of the divine element" (20) when they are defeated after waging war on Egypt and Athens.

Like the *Odyssey*, the theme of drawing upon one's resources—both physical and psychological—in order to survive is explored in *Robinson Crusoe*, where Crusoe spends twenty-eight years stranded on an island before he returns home. Defoe's work is at the fountainhead of an entire genre of writing called the Robinsonade, which Chet van Duzer describes as being "very well suited to modern western individualism" because "the challenges of surviving on an island were a milieu for demonstrating the power of a resourceful and educated individual to control his environment and to create from raw materials everything necessary for existence, to conquer the world through human labor and science" (154). This theme of being "cast away" has, in turn, led to the genre of "castaway narrative," as John Barberet explains wryly, "to account for precursors." "In addition," he writes, "utopias and castaway narratives involve islands, that is, controlled and delimited settings where the projects being undertaken by the contemporary historical community (colonialism, industrialism, urbanization, etc.) can be more easily grasped and mapped by readers" (111). Perhaps the most famous of these narratives is the film *Cast*

*Away*, released in 2000 and inspired, of course, by *Robinson Crusoe*.

Further, just as an island may serve as a character's prison, an island may be a character's paradise, which offers salvation to those who find refuge there, or to which one can travel to solve one's inner conflicts, and to recuperate, regenerate, and to experience rebirth. Islands are also ideal places to resolve conflicts *between* people, such as Prospero's island in *The Tempest*, where the exiled king brings together his usurpers through magic and a shipwreck, to right an old wrong and to bring balance to the universe. Such literary treatments of this topic are, as Stephanides says, ways of "exploring insularity as a response to the anxiety of modernity" (14).

The theme of "exploring insularity" to address "the anxiety of modernity" pervades modern literature as writers grapple with the effects of external pressures on individuals and society in general. Global forces such as commercialization, telecommunications, travel and tourism, and the media have markedly changed how we now live—especially over the last century—with the result that traditional ways of life may be judged as inferior—by others as well as themselves—and, ultimately, lost altogether. When individuals and communities try to reposition themselves within the global context, they can suffer from tension and anxiety as they grapple with redefining their identities. Writers, thus, offer a way of asserting and strengthening their distinct cultures within the larger context by grounding their work in specific locales.

Often writing that "explores insularity" can be found in "regional literature," a designation that is becoming more valued in critical literary theory, as writers choose to focus on their localized identity and culture in a global consumer culture. Writes Alexander MacLeod, "[T]he idea that the physical environment can and perhaps even should exert a deterministic power over Canadian writers has been modified, challenged, deconstructed, and selectively reconstructed by many excellent contemporary scholars" (5). One of those scholars is Herb



Wyile, who addresses regionalism's "coming of age" as it overcomes its reputation of being "associated, often unfavourably, with provincialism, with a rural context, or with local colour-writing" (xi):

The term regionalism is used alternately to describe the unifying principle of a corpus of literary texts (that is, a regional literature), the attachment of a writer to a particular place, the diversity of writing within the larger body of a national literature, or a kind of ideological consciousness or discourse . . . The rationalizing effects of a global market economy have put pressures on local economies and cultures, throwing increasing attention on culture and politics at the regional level, and forcing a redefinition of the notion of community. (x–xii)

MacLeod and Johnston certainly fit within the context of Atlantic Canada's regionalist writing, especially so because their focus on "islandness" emphasizes the theme of regionalism. It is important to recognize that they are part of a growing number of writers—such as Cape Breton's Sheldon Currie and Frank MacDonald, Newfoundland's Donna Morrissey and Michael Crummey, and Prince Edward Island's Brent MacLaine and Jane Ledwell—who, for inspiration, draw upon their attachment to a particular place that is even more defined than Atlantic Canada: their home islands of Cape Breton, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and smaller islands off the coasts of these islands as well as those off peninsular Nova Scotia. Thus, in recent years, as "island studies" has come of age, critics have come to think of and appreciate this literature as "island" literature, which may have qualities that are quite distinct from "mainland" literature. Writes Tasmanian poet and geographer Pete Hay, "Island literatures engage with the land and the sea . . . and the community. They address the large, cosmic questions of existence, but they do so within a context of shore-bound particularity" (Poetics 555). As we will see, writing from within

a bounded island existence while being universally understood and appreciated is at the heart of MacLeod's and Johnston's work.

Prince Edward Islander Anne Compton reminds us of another Prince Edward Islander whose writing is grounded in his islandness. Of poet Milton Acorn's work, she writes, "The minutiae of Island landscapes, of which he was passionately conscious, importuned the Imagist. Acorn was so permeable to the sights and sounds of his place, he was, in effect, the province of their expression: he translated the elements and physical attributes of place into language" (25). Acorn's poem "I, Milton Acorn," quoted above, demonstrates Acorn's awareness of his island roots. He very firmly grounds islanders in and on their island home, knowing that from there they have the tools to go out into the world and become good citizens of the planet. Acorn's words that liken the planet to an island in space presage Jean Arnold's theory that geography serves a purpose in literature and culture: "the small spherical island Earth [is] set in an endless ocean of space. . . . this islandlike image has emerged as one of the most powerful of all in determining our own cultural ideologies and discourses" (32). She believes that "Islands have been useful to writers because their distinctive geographical formations have supplied narrative settings that isolate ideas" (24). Island biogeographer David Quammen in his book, *The Song of the Dodo*, takes this a step further by saying, "We're headed toward understanding the whole planet as a world of islands" (130). In this modern age of globalization, then, island writers can offer an attitude of cultural confidence that comes from maintaining a distinct cultural identity, particularly one that is physically set apart, like that found on an island, where a shared identity is crucial to creating community and ensuring that the community works together to protect themselves from the sometimes hostile elements. In an age of the cookie-cutter narrative of genre fiction, authentic stories grounded in real lives that speak to universal themes are the stories that

bring the most critical acclaim. If national and international prizes, favourable reviews, and best-selling books constitute proof, MacLeod and Johnston are among the more successful, with MacLeod the winner of such prizes as the Impac Dublin Literary Award and the Trillium Award, and Johnston the winner of the Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction and the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize.

### **Island Identity**

But what does “islandness” have to do with “identity”? Anthropologist Stuart Hall defines personal identity as “the ground of action: a notion of the continuous, self-sufficient, developmental, unfolding, inner dialectic of selfhood. . . . It contains the notion of the true self, some real self inside there, hiding inside the husks of all the false selves that we present to the rest of the world” (42–3). For writers such as MacLeod and Johnston, their “ground of action” is their island and island consciousness and the inner dialectic of selfhood is unfolded through their writing. Hall goes on to say that, just as a person’s identity can be established by what a person *is*, identity is also defined in terms of what a person is *not*: “the Other that one can only know from the place from which one stands” (48). Islands by their definition are *not* the mainland; and islanders are *not* mainlanders. Most often on the periphery, islands from their earliest days were defined by their colonizing mainlands: colonial powers generally controlled the islands through political and economic means; they also wrote the history. But in recent years, as world power structures change, Hall notes that, in order to resist exclusion and marginalization, territories (including islands) have undergone “an enormous act of what I want to call imaginary political re-identification, re-territorialization and re-identification. . . . That is how and where the margins begin to speak. The margins begin to contest, the locals begin to come to representation (52–3).”

In defining who you are by who you are *not*, Zygmunt Bauman echoes Hall: “‘National identity’ was from the start, and remained for a long time, an *agonistic* notion and a battle cry.

‘Belonging’ would have lost its lustre and seductive power together with its integrating/disciplining function had it not been consistently selective and constantly given flesh and reinvigorated by the threat and practice of exclusion (21–22).” He goes on to say that “‘belonging’ and ‘identity’ are not cut in rock, that they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and revocable; and that one’s own decisions, the steps one takes, the way one acts—and the determination to stick by all that—are crucial factors of both” (11). “Theoretical decenterings,” from Marx (through his critiques of class) and Freud (psychoanalysis) to Saussure (linguistics) and de Beauvoir (feminism), have led to what Hall calls a “fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity” (44). No longer can collective social identities be thought in “the same homogenous form” (45). Identity is not a closed loop; rather, it is “always in the process of formation.”

The idea of identity not being a closed loop is suggested by historian David Weale when, speaking of Prince Edward Island, he suggests that islandness is about unity *and* separateness:

The Northumberland Strait has always been nature’s emphatic and unambiguous way of informing Islanders that they are a separate and unique people. Living on an Island inculcates a vivid and precise recognition of exactly who you are—and who you are not. Year in and year out, generation after generation, this singular geographic circumstance dictates both a sense of unity and separateness. . . . The topography and landscape of the province, that is to say, its Islandness, is the source and reference point for the imagination of Islanders. It is the primal source of our communal insight and wisdom. (82)

While he is unequivocal in stating that islandness is at the core of islanders' perceptions and belief systems about who they are and who they are not, he also knows that islanders struggle with the fact that they have more than one identity, that islanders are part of something larger. They can be Prince Edward Islanders, Cape Bretoners, or Newfoundlanders; but they can also be Maritimers and/or Atlantic Canadians; Canadians; North Americans; and so on, in an ever-widening concentric circle. But at the core, they are individuals who are shaped by what MacLeod calls an "emotional landscape as well as [a] physical landscape" (*CL*) and what Johnston says is the "circumscribed geography of home" (*Mansion* 89, *Colony* 142).

### **The Cape Breton Childscape of Alistair MacLeod**

MacLeod's emotional and physical landscapes are, of course, those of Cape Breton Island. Although MacLeod was born in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, he spent his summers in Cape Breton before moving back at an early age to the island where his parents were raised and where his ancestors settled. In a video series called *Canadian Literature*, which was produced in 1984 by the National Film Board, the video's narrator explains that MacLeod comes home every summer from his home in Windsor, Ontario, to Inverness County in Cape Breton, to "the environment that has so influenced his work" and to a house built by his grandfather. MacLeod does much of his writing "in a cabin perched on an isolated stretch of coastline." Uwe Zagratzki points out that, like many of his characters' homes, it has "a window to the sea" (189) looking out across the Northumberland Strait to Prince Edward Island. He writes on one island while looking at another.

MacLeod's stories are set primarily in Cape Breton, although some of the characters go off-island to work in the mines of Northern Ontario, where MacLeod worked as a young man, or,

as in his novel *No Great Mischief*, they move to Toronto (in close proximity to Windsor, where MacLeod spent much of his adult life). His stories are imbued with the Cape Breton landscape, as well as with, what Douglas Porteous calls, “smellscape” and “soundscape,” the worlds we experience through our senses. These include homescape, “that place [where] we are most secure, where we can drop our personas and become ourselves” (107); deathscape, poisonous urban-industrial landscapes; otherscape, the world of metaphor, fantasy, and mythology; and, most especially, childscape, where “the senses of children are much sharper than those of adults. It is certain that children have not yet developed the moral and perceptual filters that so often render the adult’s world a dull blandscape” (148). MacLeod believes that the “childscape” in which he grew up has had a profound effect on his writing, as he says in the video, *Canadian Literature*:

I write out of a specific locality, which is Cape Breton, or certain areas of Cape Breton. I think that if you do your region or your particular place very well, what happens next is that it becomes universally understood. . . . Living in Nova Scotia has affected my writing to a great, great extent because it is the area in which I grew up. . . in which most of my first impressions were formed. I think this leads to a kind of emotional intensity within the writer, and this, for better or for worse, seems to be my emotional landscape as well as my physical landscape. And I think if you feel strongly about a place emotionally, then that sort of becomes your place and then you give your best to it.

MacLeod is very precise about the areas he writes about, demonstrating an almost extreme degree of specificity as he narrows his locality from “Cape Breton” to “certain areas of Cape Breton.” It is because of this specificity that he is able to provide the detail and intensity to which

readers from all over the world can relate. Frances Berces writes, “[I]t is through the interaction of psychology with a specific place that his realism takes on complexity and more than local interest” (114). Kulyk Keefer calls MacLeod’s narrative “a ‘breaking through’ in his writing without ‘breaking free’ of his native region” where he has found “new ways of using the particulars of their time and place to break through the enclosures which prevent us from knowing ourselves and our world” (237–8). Because the stories are so grounded in the local and are written with such authenticity and passion, his writing has a universal quality to it: the stories ring true. This explains, in part, at least, MacLeod’s popularity: his issues are shared by people around the world, with his books now available in dozens of languages.

MacLeod’s childhood experiences in Cape Breton have become a well-spring of material from which he can draw, or as David Creelman says, “formed the templates of his creative vision” (126). He refers to the emotional intensity that comes from his childhood experiences that create the emotional and physical landscapes that infuse his writing. These landscapes become part of body memory, imprinted on him just as he imprints himself back onto the landscape and its people through his writing. MacLeod talks about how those landscapes then become “your place,” implying an ownership of and identity with Cape Breton. By saying “you give your best to it,” he pays homage to it by elegizing it, or as Colin Nicholson writes, MacLeod is “playing a pibroch in his own behalf” (99). Drawing upon his own ancestors who left the Isle of Eigg in the Scottish islands in 1791, MacLeod notes the importance of what Nicholson calls “the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen” by saying that his own ancestors “carried with them the whole body of whatever it is that people carry with them—folklore, emotional weight” (92). Generations of knowledge of his ancestors’ Scottish islands and their adopted Cape Breton Island, along with the generational grief, anguish, and guilt that stems from

leaving, serves only to deepen MacLeod's knowledge and roots in understanding and writing with specificity about his island home. This narrative is explored in depth in his short story "Island."

In her discussion about regional literature, Jeanette Lynes in her article, "Is Newfoundland Inside that T.V.?" reiterates author Eli Mandel's suggestion that "regional literature may be a literature of childhood" (84), citing his essay, "Images of Prairie Man." He writes that the child's vision "is of home; and that surely is the essence of what we mean by a region, the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the first place, the first vision of things, the first clarity of things. . ." (206). Although Mandel is writing about the Prairies being his "first place," they find resonance in MacLeod's Cape Breton—his "first place," which, in this case, is an "island" place. The power of the child's vision of home is echoed by Douglas Porteous when he writes of the "deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up . . . where we have had particularly moving experiences," which become "a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves to the world. . ." (43). This sense of orientation contributes to MacLeod's sense of rootedness and tradition. He says, "I like to believe that old idea that no one else has your fingerprints, so that when you're doing your work well it should be something that no one else can do but yourself." For MacLeod, then, these associations go deep, feeding into his identity as a Cape Breton Island writer. There is no stronger marker of identity than a fingerprint.

Writers are often told to write what haunts them. In MacLeod's short story "The Boat," the protagonist is a middle-aged university professor who is wracked by guilt over his father's suicide, which forced him into making the choice to leave his Cape Breton home to pursue his



career, abandoning his mother and a traditional way of life: “the grounds my father fished were those his father before him fished and there were others before and before” (24). In the video, *Canadian Literature*, MacLeod says he wanted to write about the “importance of the past . . . of tradition . . . the lives of those who have gone before them. We think of ourselves as instant people, no past, no surroundings. . . .” He makes this point again in an interview with Colin Nicholson, saying, “I think of myself as coming from a particular place and a particular time. I do not think of myself as anything like an ‘instant’ North American, not sure of his mother’s maiden name” (97). In *Canadian Literature* he says he also set out to write about choice: “the price that all of us must pay for the roads we eventually walk in life.” In this case, the price is sleepless nights with overflowing ashtrays, and drinking coffee in an all-night restaurant, “know[ing] your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue” (25). In his interview with Nicholson he expands on the theme of choice, saying, “[The father] is a man who is caught up in a kind of hereditary pattern, where people fish, and the only son inherits the father’s boat—that kind of life. But what I was getting at with the father was that there was a person who maybe didn’t want to do that at all, but who is just caught up in this inherited life” (94).

The theme of the “inherited life” underpins MacLeod’s basic themes of choice, loyalty, economic determinism, inheritance, tradition, and change, which thread throughout all MacLeod’s writing. Berces writes, “Faced with environmental undertow and the nothingness to which it can lead, some of MacLeod’s characters resist the nihilism they experience only because they have come accustomed to doing so. . . .” (118). The characters who resist are the resilient ones, islanders who, like MacLeod himself, have come to know and appreciate their island identity.

### Sourcing Identity in *Baltimore's Mansion*

While MacLeod writes about his island while physically on his island, Wayne Johnston in his memoir *Baltimore's Mansion* says he “can only write about this place when [he] regard[s] it from a distance” (236). Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, Johnston grew up in the Goulds, just inland from St. John's, home of his mother's family. Johnston's father Arthur grew up in Ferryland, forty miles south of St. John's. Johnston now makes his home in Toronto. Johnston writes:

. . . I have chosen the one profession that makes it impossible for me to live here. That I can only write about this place when I regard it from a distance. That my writing feeds off a homesickness that I need and that I hope is benign and will never go away, though I know there has to be a limit. And that someday it will break my heart. . . . (236)

Like MacLeod, Johnston feeds off an intensity of emotion in order to write about his island of Newfoundland. But unlike MacLeod, Johnston refers to this intensity as a kind of pathology, a sickness that comes from longing for home, an emotion that is so intense that it becomes hurtful. He knows he needs distance in order to write, feeding off the homesickness that comes with being away from his island home. He wonders if it is a benign sickness, or if it will eventually hurt him, or worse, that it will desert him. Because he depends on it for his writing, he certainly does not want it to go away. But in “knowing” that there has to be a limit, he worries that his well-spring will run dry and cease to sustain him. The words, “someday it will break my heart” echo MacLeod's coalminers in “The Vastness of the Dark,” who say that being part of such a long lineage of coalminers “seems to bust your balls and it's bound to break your heart” (58). Like the miners, Johnston is connected to a long lineage of Newfoundlanders, but he knows that someday this connection will break his heart, too.

Insights into how Johnston's childhood may have affected his writing can be found in his memoir, *Baltimore's Mansion*. Indeed, it is fascinating to compare the reverberations between his memoir and his novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, a fictitious version of the life of Joey Smallwood published only a year earlier in 1998. A memoir about growing up in Newfoundland, *Baltimore's Mansion* traces the impact of the 1948 referendum to join Canada on the island of Newfoundland—and on the family: how Charlie's inexplicable betrayal on referendum day led to a festering guilt that affected all their lives. The book is a lament for a loss of a country; a discussion of Newfoundlanders' pride in being “islanded” and how joining Canada affected that sense of independence; about leaving and staying, and how painful it can be when you must make the choice to do one or the other.

Even today, Newfoundlanders feel passionately about whether joining Canada was a positive step, or if it was the worst thing that could have happened to them. Before 1948, St. John's was an international city, with its face turned more to Europe and the eastern seaboard of the US than to the west and Canada. David Weale, in a keynote address to “Islands of the World VII,” an international island studies conference, raises the idea of how the mythologies of different islands address the matter of separation:

And deal with it they must. One way or another island people must conceptualize and mythologize a relationship with the rest of the world, and the rest of the species. In fact, I suspect one of the surest means of gauging the temper of an island community is to examine how it has negotiated—in imagination and in action—the condition of its absolute separateness. (Here and Away 2)

In defining themselves, islanders must get to the heart of just how separate they are from the “other.” Like the end of a marriage, perhaps the tenor of islanders' feelings toward their

islandness can be attributed, in part, to the terms of the separation. If it is an amicable parting, with both parties in agreement, the islanders might find themselves in easy relationship with the mainland. However, if it is an acrimonious parting, with one party struggling bitterly to hold onto the other, the islanders might feel particularly strident in their separation. In the case of Newfoundland, where the vote was narrowly in favour of separation (52 to 48 per cent), the island was divided internally, causing an internal turmoil from which Newfoundlanders as a people have never recovered. Some Newfoundlanders still feel they are a nation. At the heart of their mythology, then, is how they came to lose their absolute separateness by becoming a province of Canada instead of maintaining their independence by becoming a sovereign state.

As *Mansion* shows, the referendum pitted friend against friend, family member against family member. In the case of Charlie, who on a “solitary impulse” voted in favour of Confederation, the vote tore him apart. This example of the dualism inherent in island societies, which is often exacerbated by lack of choice since islanders have no hinterland from which to draw, may be exaggerated by other elements of island living: in Charlie’s case, fear of being judged by his close-knit community for, like the other closet confederates, “having to live their whole lives a lie . . . the poor things, the hell, the living hell their lives must be” (58–9).

However, as Lawrence Mathews writes in his review of *Mansion*:

We are given no direct information about the source of the “solitary impulse.” . . .  
Is his action completely arbitrary, a comment on the irrationality of the  
Newfoundland spirit? . . . To draw such a conclusion is to be reductively ironic.  
Perhaps Johnston’s subtler point is that Charlie’s act reflects the ability of  
Newfoundlanders to adapt intuitively to changing circumstances, an ability that  
has allowed “Newfoundland” to survive as a cultural entity from Lord Baltimore’s

time to the present. (222)

If this is indeed the case, then Charlie's choice is an example of islanders' resilience that allows them to adapt to change and, thus, to survive. "For Wayne Johnston's generation," Mathews goes on to say, "the very existence of the country known as Newfoundland was just a story. Nevertheless, *Baltimore's Mansion* will rank as one of the most delicately written and powerfully felt retellings of that complex and enigmatic tale" (224).

Other echoes of *Colony*, such as similar themes and repetitions in imagery, can be found throughout *Baltimore's Mansion*. The model for many of the enigmatic father figures in *Colony* and in Johnston's earlier works (particularly *The Divine Ryans*), seems to be Johnston's own father, Arthur. The narrative device of building suspense by the slow unfolding of secrets, which also prevails in his books, would appear to have its roots in Johnston's own life, exemplified by the unfolding of the story of his grandfather's betrayal. "In its obsession with Newfoundland's past and with the outcome of the referendum," writes Herb Wyile, "*Baltimore's Mansion* provides an analogue to *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* as a non-fictional meditation on what was and what might have been for Newfoundland" (5). That Wyile chose to call the memoir a "meditation" is significant. The descriptor suggests a contemplative or devotional writing that engages emotionally and spiritually with the reader, lamenting loss of identity as an independent nation—which is the basis from which they see themselves.

Similarities between the two books extend to Johnston's descriptions of leaving Newfoundland at pivotal points in his characters' lives, and in his own. In *Colony*, Johnston describes Smallwood's first journey off the Island where he stands at the rail of the ship until the island fades from view; instead it feels like the boat is towing the island behind them. Johnston's experience in *Mansion* echoes that of Smallwood: "I decided that when I left the island for the

first time, it would be by boat. It would be appropriate, the first time, to watch the land slowly fade from view” (93). But, perhaps, the writer fancies himself to be slightly more pragmatic than Smallwood: “Knowing I would lose sight of Newfoundland eventually, I did not stand at the rail. Instead I sat facing away from it for as long as I was able to resist the urge to look. And when finally I did look, it was gone” (215). Both quotes suggest that the island is so deeply rooted in their psyches that both must pay tribute to it by watching it disappear. Even by consciously resisting the urge to look, Johnston shows just how deep the emotion goes. For Smallwood, who feels like he is towing the island behind him, this devotion goes further as he implies that he cannot leave the island—and his island identity—behind.

Throughout *Colony*, Smallwood’s view of the ocean defines his relationship with his island, his “circumscribed geography of home” (142). In *Mansion*, Johnston writes, “Time was local, personal and even then less enduring than their experience of space, the circumscribed geography of ‘home’” (89). In *Colony*, he refers to Smallwood’s father discovering “the limits of a leash that up to that point he hadn’t known he was wearing. . .” (132). In *Mansion*, Johnston describes how his mother’s new house was just across the street from her father’s: that was “how far she had got, that was the limit of her life’s adventure and her leash, across the road” (233). The repeated image of the leash suggests an attachment to home that is difficult to sever because of the power that one end of the leash exerts over the other. In both cases, it is the power of their island home that is exerted over both Smallwood and Johnston’s mother, and neither can escape its tether.

Throughout *Mansion*, Johnston speaks to the themes of islandness. In the following examples, with Johnston imagining going to the mainland, the theme is separateness and the duality that comes with separateness, what Weale calls “separation anxiety” (2):

Crossing the stream of fog on the isthmus of Avalon was momentous enough for now. This other crossing I was contemplating I could not imagine. The other side of the gulf was remoter than the moon, on which men had just landed and which I had seen with my own eyes countless times. Only on TV and in photographs had I ever seen the world alleged to exist beyond the shores of Newfoundland. I had read about it in books, but any book not set in Newfoundland was to me a work of fiction. (94)

He goes on to say, “Twenty-one and he has been nowhere in the world but Newfoundland. He should stop thinking of it as an island, as a place set apart from others by the sea. An island, until you leave it, *is* the world” (120). From the vantage point of an island that is set off from the mainland, Johnston likens Newfoundland to planet Earth floating in space and the mainland as so far away that it can only be seen in images beamed back from space. For Islanders, the Island is the centre from which everything flows. The duality comes from wanting to be separate and apart—not belonging—yet at the same time wanting to be “a part of”—belonging. Says Weale, “at the heart of human identity, whether individuals or communal, is an exquisite tension between separateness and connectedness; between ego-centrism and relationship” (2). And it is that tension that often makes for the most compelling reading in any literature.

Johnston spent much of his childhood visiting his father’s family in Ferryland, which was even a step further removed from his island home, in the temporal and psychological sense, as well as the physical: “The sudden transition from pavement to gravel marked a great divide, it seemed to me, a crossing-over in both place and time, into Ferryland and into the past, my father’s past” (17). Just as MacLeod’s sense of identity comes partly from inheritance, so, too, does Johnston’s, by going into his father’s past—giving him an unbroken lineage that becomes

his writer's well-spring, but which will eventually break his heart.

Johnston has spoken in interviews about why he is unable to write in Newfoundland. In an interview with Andrew Pyper, he says that he has "banished" himself to North Toronto in order to "eliminate the temptation to socialize" (Pyper). The word "banished" suggests one of the most severe forms of punishment that can be exacted on someone who is so connected to home. Used, however, in relation to the phrase "temptation to socialize," Johnston is being sardonic, knowing full well that the reasons go much deeper but he attempts to cover it up with humour. In an interview with Jennifer Delisle, he says he feels a need to be "separated" from Newfoundland in order to write about it, to imagine it, explaining that on the island "life was too immediate. I was too inundated by the place and its details" (Delisle). Here he is being more pragmatic in his reasons, but the word "separated" suggests a self-imposed "ensilement": Johnston has created an island of his own in Toronto. He has "abandoned" Newfoundland to give him what Wyile calls "the distance on which his imagination can feed" (6).

Like his father, he is consumed by an obsession with an imaginary Newfoundland:

"I could tell him that I know as well as he does how it feels to crave what you can never have" (*Mansion* 236). Thus Johnston is a literal exile, his situation paralleling his father's metaphoric exile. That literal exile, though, is portrayed as a much more constructive and positive ambivalence.

His father "lived abroad" (248) in Alberta for six years, escaping a place from which he could no longer abide. Johnston says, "I could tell him . . . that he will come back to this place that he sometimes thinks he hates, while I who never think of it with anything but love must stay away" (236). This is the power of lost love, of course, and the hold it can continue to exert if a person will never let the wounds heal by persistently reopening them. And it is this power upon which



Johnston says he needs to feed in order to write his novels.

Johnston joins other Newfoundland authors, such as Donna Morrissey and Patrick Kavanaugh, writers of what Jennifer Delisle has termed Newfoundland “diasporic literature,” which, she posits, informs feelings of Newfoundland neo-nationalism: “an ‘imagined community,’ a people united by a constructed, imaginary, nationalist bond. This imagined community exists, in part, because it is not limited by the confines of space, but is able to survive the trauma of diaspora and Confederation” (Delisle).

Often we find this kind of escape—particularly from islands—essential, in order to better appreciate home. Living away brings distance and clearer focus, which can be vital for a writer. Porteous writes, “The idea of home as a base, a source of identity . . . is the goal of all the voyages of self-discovery which have become the characteristic shape of modern literature” (107). “Journeys are necessary in order to discover primitive roots. Exile is likely, and even in exile one is surrounded by those who re-create home . . . home tugs throughout our adult lives” (142–3). While journeying, Porteous writes, “home remains the territorial core. The necessary sense of adventure gained by venturing from home is supported by knowledge that the home remains intact and the ways back to it are known” (158). In keeping with the idea of “primitive roots,” the self is so tied to its place of origin that it can become physiologically “sick” for “home.” For Johnston, both “journey” and “exile” from his primitive roots—his island of Newfoundland—serve to sharpen his anxiety and make him homesick for his island. This homesickness that comes from his self-imposed exile serves to strengthen his sense of island identity and manifests itself in his writing about his home island, which is the source of his identity. Similarly, homesickness is physically manifested in some of MacLeod’s characters, such as the MacDonald brothers who cannot resist a powerful compulsion to drive thousands of miles

home to Cape Breton, or their grandfather who, improbably, gets an erection every time he crosses the Canso Causeway. And for most of MacLeod's characters—many of whom find themselves forced into their own exile, mostly because of work and creative opportunities—"home tugs" powerfully and irrevocably. But even while they are away, they tend to seek out other Cape Bretoners who are similarly exiled. While working the mines in Northern Ontario, the MacDonald miners consort with the Irish and the French. When Smallwood and Fielding travel to New York, they live with other Newfoundlanders. Re-creating home serves to assuage their homesickness for a time. But, in the end, they cannot resist the urge to return.

Barry Lopez says that "human imagination is shaped by the architectures it encounters at an early age" (11). Johnston has been fashioned or imprinted by the physical and emotional landscape in which he grew up, providing what Lopez calls "a storied relationship to a place" or "a comforting intimacy." As Johnston writes in *Mansion*, "I wonder if I have lived in this house long enough, have looked out on this prospect often enough for it to be imprinted on my brain as the view from the house on the Gaze is on his" (204).

In order to survive, Johnston has left Newfoundland, just as Lord Baltimore sought survival by abandoning his newly built mansion in Ferryland after spending only one brutal Newfoundland winter there. But, unlike Baltimore, whose legacy is an archaeological dig sifted through by students from Memorial University, Johnston continues to be haunted by his island of origin, Newfoundland, and continues to be compelled to write about it, warts and all:

Because of its climate and geography, Newfoundland is ideally suited for the production of alcoholics, royal commissions, snow, unsolvable enigmas, self-pity, mosquitoes and black flies, inferiority complexes, delusions of grandeur, savage irony, impotent malice, unwarranted optimism, entirely justified despair, tall tales,

pipe dreams, cannon fodder, children who bear an unnatural resemblance to their grandparents, expatriates. (123)

Johnston certainly cannot be accused of romanticizing his home. Whereas an outsider would be figuratively drawn and quartered for daring to hint at some of these issues, because he is a Newfoundlander himself, Johnston can get away with being deliberately provocative. He is aware of every single limitation, and by listing them in such a way he seems to take pride in saying just how bad it is—and yet the island survives. This acerbic litany of Newfoundland's shortcomings serves to affirm the strength of his identity. But by saving "expatriates" for last, Johnston reveals his own guilt in abandoning his island.

### **Boundedness: The Theme**

As stated at the outset, the theme of boundedness is a common link among several of MacLeod's and Johnston's short stories and novels. The chapters that follow will explore how boundedness connects their writings, with a focus on the island childhood experience. The first, Boundedness in Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and Alistair MacLeod's "Island," explores the effects of geographic boundedness on their writing, through examining how the ocean's boundary defines a character. The second, Emotional Landscapes: The Geography of the Psyche in Wayne Johnston's *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat" and "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," analyzes how some island characters come to be psychologically bounded, and includes an examination of childhood influences. And the third, Outsiders and Insiders in Wayne Johnston's *The Custodian of Paradise* and Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*, seeks to explore how social influences can affect how islanders view themselves as outside or inside their island communities.

In writing about islandness, MacLeod and Johnston are both reclaiming their island stories, portraying Cape Breton and Newfoundland as places definitively apart from the mainland, reaffirming their islandness physically and psychologically.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Boundedness in Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and Alistair MacLeod's "Island"**

Nowhere . . .

Is there a spot not measured by hands;  
no direction I couldn't walk  
to the wave-lined edge of home.

—from "The Island" by Milton Acorn (53)

#### **Pushing the Boundaries**

For anyone living on an island, the ocean is ever-present. Whether it is physically out one's back door or several miles away, the ocean is always there, literally and metaphorically, affecting and often governing islanders' lives. As a barrier it can both imprison islanders and protect them. As an elemental force it can just as easily take life as give it. Its shoreline is a physical demarcation, a line showing precisely where the familiar ends and the unfamiliar begins—and a line that must be crossed consciously and deliberately, physically and psychologically, whenever someone wants to leave. Thus the ocean gives an island a border that is different from one on the mainland, providing a sense of boundedness that one does not experience when there is no water to cross. If, as David Creelman writes, "Identity is not just a matter of reinscribing the self into an enduring narrative," but rather it is created when people "act, or at least attempt to act, in order to establish a self," (132) then how does the ocean's boundedness influence Johnston's and MacLeod's characters as they establish "self," and thus, create an island identity? How do these authors convey this sense of physical boundedness in their descriptions—through word choice, imagery, and metaphors—and how does this translate to their sense of island identity? How do their characters push the physical boundaries, and, ultimately, cross them? How does being set apart from the mainland affirm islandness both physically and psychologically? And, finally,

what does their work tell us of boundedness, connectedness, islandness, and island identity?

MacLeod's fiction is filled with descriptions of the sea, in all moods and seasons.

Although MacLeod's environment is not "demonized," says Creelman, "the natural world is unrelenting, dangerous, and devouring. The raging seas, and unstable mines make manifest the force of chaos that underlies nature's drive to assimilate and extinguish" (130). To give a sense of the power of these "raging seas," it is worth quoting in its entirety this fourteen-year-old narrator's picture of the ocean described in the short story "In the Fall" from the collection

*Island:*

Each day dawns duller and more glowering and the waves of the grey Atlantic are sullen and almost yellow at their peaks as they pound relentlessly against the round smooth boulders that lie scattered as if by a careless giant at the base of the ever-resisting cliffs. At night, when we lie in our beds, we can hear the waves rolling in and smashing, so relentless and regular that it is possible to count rhythmically between the thunder of each: one, two, three, four, one two, three, four.

It is hard to realize that this is the same ocean that is the crystal blue of summer when only the thin oil-slicks left by the fishing boats or the startling whiteness of the riding seagulls mar its azure sameness. Now it is roiled and angry, and almost anguished; hurling up the brown dirty balls of scudding foam, the sticks of pulpwood from some lonely freighter, the caps of unknown men, buoys from mangled fishing nets and the inevitable bottles that contain no messages. And always also the shreds of blackened and stringy seaweed that it has ripped and torn from its own lower regions, as if this is the season for self-

mutilation—the pulling out of the secret, private, unseen hair. (99)

Through James's describing the ocean in such terms, MacLeod projects the feelings of his characters onto nature, utilizing language and emotion to create a layer of meaning that underpins the action in the story. MacLeod uses such vocabulary as "glowering," "sullen," "pounding," "ever-resisting," "smashing," "relentless," and "mutilation," words that suggest anger and which then escalate to violence, culminating with pain and mutilation. Similarly, his description of the ocean in summer has a hardness to it: "crystal blue," "startling whiteness," "azure sameness," implying that the ocean is devoid of anything tender. James thinks of the ocean in terms of a careless giant who is relentless in his quest to conquer the land, symbolic of the relentless grinding poverty of his family's life. MacRae's violent language and attitude are comparable to James's description of the ocean: savage, livid, "like some huge growth that is nourished by the foul-smelling waters that he himself has brought" (112). MacRae treats the horse Scott, whom he has come to collect to be turned into mink-feed, with cruel force, and when that proves ineffective he becomes livid and flies into a rage. The family, like the island, must withstand the forces of nature and MacRae, as well as the poverty that is wearing them down. James is well aware of his family's situation, how the parents have become ground down and trapped by poverty, leaving little room for anything akin to love or tenderness and barely hanging on in their bid to survive. His description, then, reflects his own inner turmoil, as well as that of the rest of the family.

The story's title, "In the Fall," refers to another kind of "fall," besides that of the season. Frances Berces compares it to a loss of innocence, as "the innocent assumption of parental infallibility gradually weakens," particularly for James's younger brother David "who sees his parents' sale of an aged and ailing pit-horse for mink-feed as a betrayal of trust and affection, if

not their humanity” (119). After the father leads Scott onto MacRae’s trailer and MacRae drives away, David reacts by slaughtering his mother’s prized capons in a fit of anger and frustration. Following the violence, however, James feels a psychological shift. He clings to hope as he would cling to land: “You do not gain much but you can hang on to what little you have and your toes curl almost instinctively within your shoes as if they are trying to grasp the earth” (117). The parents, “blown together,” “are not moving either, only trying to hold their place,” (117) a respite from the relentless harshness that is the inevitability of their lives. Suggestive of a momentary loosening of the sea’s power, the mother has removed the coral combs that keep her hair in check and James sees it “in all its length” for the first time as it “engulfs my father’s head and he buries his face within its heavy darkness” (117). Meanwhile, the ocean “thunders and roars in its invisible nearness” until “you are almost immobile and breathless and blind and deaf. Almost but not quite” (116). These words, “Almost but not quite,” offer a ray of hope. The younger brother’s wanton destruction of the birds has broken through the family’s emotional boundedness and awakened them to other emotions. Creelman writes, “The older son recognizes that in a deterministic world uncertainty and compromise are inevitable, but if the losses are authentically recognized a deeper humanity can be retained and even strengthened” (133). The storm continues around the family, but, at least for now, the parents and James and David are holding their place against the ocean and their despair, together.

Even when MacLeod describes the ocean in gentle terminology, as he does in the following examples from *No Great Mischief*, it is not benign. Always the land is succumbing to the ocean’s power, to the point where the ocean does damage, always pushing against the shoreline, patiently eating away at the land: “A new smoothness born of a new wearing, or small pockmarks on new surfaces where previously there were none. The cliff was moving inland,



slowly but steadily” (73). Later, he writes, “At night one can hear the sound of the ocean as it nudges the land. Almost as if it is insistently pushing the land further back. The sound is not of storm but rather one of patient persistence and it is not at all audible in the summer months. Yet now it is as rhythmical as the pulsing of the blood in its governance by the moon” (191–2). Once again, there is a hint of sexual imagery, with words like “rhythmical” and “pulsing of the blood,” and allusions to the woman’s menstrual cycle which is also governed by the moon. David Weale in his essay “Chasin’ the Shore” calls the shoreline “a place of joining together; a powerful erogenous zone, where land and sea mate, and the eternal makes love to the temporal” (2). In “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” this is borne out in the following passage:

The harbour itself is very small and softly curving, seeming like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing the life that now lies within it but which originated from without; came from without and through the narrow, rock-tight channel that admits the entering and withdrawing sea. That sea is entering again now, forcing itself gently but inevitably through the tightness of the opening and laving the rocky walls and rising and rolling into the harbour’s inner cove. . . . (119)

From this example, it would appear that MacLeod’s ocean is an insistent male, which, depending on its mood, is in the act of either seducing, tenderly making love to, or savaging the female island. But always the ocean is the more powerful and dominant force, while the island is subservient. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that with a few exceptions, MacLeod’s treatment of sex throughout his writing is relegated to the natural world, where animals and humans copulate primarily for the purposes of breeding. Writes Janice Kulyk Keefer, “For MacLeod’s people it becomes and confers a kind of death, passionate and inevitable, bringing ‘grim release’ more often than joy” (183). Creelman adds, “Joy is not an option in MacLeod’s existential fiction”

(134). On economically challenged islands, it would appear that there is very little room for romantic love when people are fighting to survive.

MacLeod does not restrict the ocean to suggestions of sexuality. In “Winter Dog,” the ocean represents the unknown. The ice-covered ocean looks like “another far and distant country on the screen of a snowy television” (267). It is where you go “to find newness and the extraordinary,” (258) including people from shipwrecks, “the dead as well as the living,” (259) who have washed up on shore as their final resting place or to seek refuge. In “To Every Thing There is a Season,” “the high sea’s darkness” (210) is something to be saved from, for without the drowning man’s ship to wave to, “it seems our fragile lives would be so much more desperate” (210). In these passages, the island literally represents a place of refuge from the ocean’s omnipotence, and the ship figuratively represents hope against the inevitability of death, “the high sea’s darkness.”

As we have seen, MacLeod’s ocean boundaries affect his island’s inhabitants, creating a world where people are, as Creelman says, “so circumscribed by the limiting cultural and environmental conditions” (129) that they find themselves with fewer choices. “Indeed, environmental conditions are at times so powerful that the texts approach a kind of determinism, with their insistence that individual freedom is subsumed in the numerous pressures of immediate circumstance” (129). With so little choice, MacLeod’s islanders find themselves pushing against the boundaries—and often breaching them. Pete Hay argues for this porousness of boundaries in his article, “A Phenomenology of Islands”:

Most of the literature arguing against concepts of islands as essentially hard-edged and insular take the view that the mobile or permeable boundary . . . is a liberated zone; a site of possibility. . . . [R]ather than constituting movement-constraining

barriers, island boundaries invite transgression; inspire restlessness; demand to be breached. . . . (22–3)

To earn their living, islanders constantly cross their islands' boundaries. To fish you must cross the shoreline; to mine you must go beneath the earth's surface and often under the sea; to work in the lumber woods you must cross the forest's boundary into the interior; and to farm you must break the earth's skin. In "The Road to Rankin's Point," the grandmother's three brothers push the boundaries and die:

. . . perished in the accidental ways that grew out of their lives—lives that were as intensely physical as the deaths that marked their end. One as a young man in the summer sun when the brown-dappled horses bolted and he fell into the teeth of a mowing machine. A second in a storm at sea when the vessel sank while plying its way across the straits to Newfoundland. A third frozen upon the lunar ice fields of early march when the sealing ship became separated from its men in a sudden obliterating blizzard. (160)

The eighteen-year-old narrator in "The Vastness of the Dark," again named James, wants to leave the island entirely, feeling he can barely escape from "gigantic tentacles, or huge monstrous hands like my grandfather's to seize and hold me back" (45). He says, "It is only when I have left the Island that I can feel free to assume my new identity, which I don like carefully preserved new clothes taken from within their pristine wrappings. It assumes that I am from Vancouver, which is as far away as I can imagine" (45). James believes that by leaving the Island he will be able to leave his Island identity behind and simply start over with new clothes and a clean slate. But, by the end of the story, James is not as certain as he was when he started out. He says, "For I had somehow thought that 'going away' was but a physical thing. And that it had

only to do with movement . . . or with the crossing of bodies of water or with the boundaries of borders” (55–6). He realizes that in pushing the boundaries of where he is, he cannot escape the boundaries of who he is. Nor, in the end, when he realizes the importance of his roots and his unique identity gained because of “the older people of my past [who] are more complicated than perhaps I had thought,” (56) people who have given him “a soul I did not even know that I possessed,” (57) is he really sure that he wants to. As his grandfather tells him, “Don’t forget to come back, James, it’s the only way you’ll be content. Once you drink underground water it becomes a part of you. . . . It’s what will wake you up at night and never ever leave you alone” (44). The self created on an island cannot be removed from that island, making it difficult or impossible to cross a boundary. The roots of the self cannot be dislodged. Similarly, Christopher Gittings writes about the characters in “The Road to Rankin’s Point,” saying they are “borne away from their Cape Breton homes along what Calum refers to as a ‘big, fast, brutal road that leads into the world,’ returning home with the doubled perception of outsider and native to the Gaelic culture” (96). It is this “doubled perception” of outsider and insider that causes internal conflict within so many of MacLeod’s characters, a conflict that wakes them up at night.

The miners in “The Closing Down of Summer” discover new boundaries when they break the earth’s surface to go below. The narrator is aware of the irony of his profession:

Aware of how contradictory it seemed that someone who was bothered by confinement should choose to spend his working days in the most confined of spaces. . . . In the chill and damp we have given ourselves to the breaking down of walls and barriers. We have sentenced ourselves to enclosures so that we might taste the giddy joy of breaking through. Always hopeful of breaking through, though we know we never will break free. (201)

Just as the miners are confined by the walls of rock, islanders are confined by the boundedness of the sea. Yet for most of MacLeod's Islanders, they do not know the "giddy joy" of breaking through. And, when they do, they are never really free.

As Islanders know, the ocean's boundary is also where you find the beach, to go to for relaxation and rejuvenation, or to just forget about everything for a while. It is a "liminal space," in psychological terms "a place where identities dissolve and we stand there on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be" (parole.aporee.org). As Weale reminds us, "In Celtic ritual a boundary of any kind was always a place of power and revelation: a place to cross from this world to the other" (2). It is just such a place where MacLeod's MacKinnon miners in "The Closing Down of Summer" await the August gale that will signal their departure to South Africa, where they heal their broken bodies and brown their leprosy-white skin on a tranquil crescent-shaped beach. They wonder if it is a place of "the end and the beginning," (204) as they know that some of them may not return from the mine in South Africa. When they finally "close down summer" and leave, the waves "obliterated the outlines of our bodies in the sand and our footprints. . . . There remains no evidence that we have ever been. The sea has washed its sand slate clean" (205). The men have had a brief respite on the beach, which for them has been a powerful in-between place for rest and reflection, before moving on to an uncertain, dangerous future that for some of them may hold death. It is also a place of power and revelation for Agnes in "The Island" as she reclaims her femininity for an afternoon, changing out of her coveralls into a summer dress and going down to the rock by the shore to await the mackerel fishermen. "After the first frenzy they were quieter, lying stretched beneath the sun. Sometimes one of the younger men got up and skipped flat stones across the surface of the sea" (402). Finally, when the sun starts to set, the men pick

up their things and leave. MacLeod only hints at what went on, referring to the “human seed” and the hoped-for pregnancy that never came. But for Agnes, the scene marks the end of one stage of her life and the beginning of the next, that of her journey to becoming the “madwoman of the island.”

Whereas MacLeod often describes the ocean in terms of natural processes, Johnston describes it more in terms of his characters’ relationships to it, or as Richard Bernstein in the *New York Times Book Review* calls “the very desolate quality of the landscape and the corresponding affliction of the human soul” (2). And although MacLeod creates an environment that Creelman calls “clearly hard, threatening, alienating, and meaningless,” he stresses that “nihilism has little force in his stories,” (131) in sharp comparison with Johnston’s characters who often question their existence, with sometimes devastating results. Kulyk Keefer in her article “Nova Scotia’s Literary Landscapes” tries to account for this difference, too, by saying that, although “the sight or at least the smell of the Atlantic is always at hand,” Nova Scotian writers do not see the ocean as “menacingly, metaphysically ‘Other’ but rather, an integral, unavoidable part of our daily lives” (27–8).

For many of Wayne Johnston’s characters, for instance, the ocean represents a void or the infinite or God. Alluding to the biblical flood, in the following passage from *Colony*, Joey Smallwood says, “For the first time in my life, I understood how a man might be attracted to the sea, even prefer it to the land, especially an island. The land was secondary, a temporary elevation of the ocean floor over which the waters would close again someday” (390). Like Smallwood, several of Johnston’s characters are challenged by the existential questionings that the ocean posits. Smallwood sums it up when he says, “Nothing so enisles you like the sea” (389). How these characters cope with their sense of being enisled depends on the strength and

nature of their inner resources and resilience.

Although a young Devlin Stead in *Navigator* experiences these feelings of alienation from an early age, he learns to overcome them by the end of the novel. For instance, Devlin feels as if he and his mother are an island in their own community, “like rocks around which the congregation flowed” (9). And after his mother’s death, his Aunt Daphne takes him to see the ocean for the first time. There he realizes that his home town of St. John’s is alone on the coast, on the edge of civilization, “the last light on the coast as you went north, the last one worth investigating anyway.”

“It’s so flat,” I said.

She smiled. I could think of nothing else to say. Sky. Wind. Light. Air. Cold. Grey. Far. Salt. Small. Now all these words meant something they had never meant before, and the word *sea* contained them all. The word *sea* spread outward in my mind, flooding all its chambers until, by that one word, every word I knew was changed. I would find, the next day, that from having seen the sea, I was better able to smell and taste it, too, no matter where in the city I was—indoors, outdoors, at home, at school, in my bedroom late at night.

“They don’t know we’re here,” she said. “We know we’re here. We know all about them. But they don’t know we’re here.” (19)

For Devlin, the experience of the sea gives language meaning, creates definition. It colours you in and gives material substance to the abstract. So, too, does the sea create meaning for the self. It is perhaps no coincidence that at the moment Devlin learns just how the sea guides every aspect of his life, from senses and colours to concepts and words, his aunt tells him how minute and insignificant he is in comparison with the rest of the world. Unlike Charlie Smallwood, who is

never able to come to terms with the self in relation to the sea, Devlin is eventually able to overcome these feelings as he journeys from St. John's to New York to the far north and back again, learning about the forces that have shaped him and over which he has had no control. In spite of what she said earlier, ironically it is Aunt Daphne's unconditional love and forgiveness that gives Devlin the resilience and courage to face who he is, so that when he has the opportunity many years and circumstances later to share a similar experience with his girlfriend Kristine, he does not do what Daphne did. As he watches Kristine leave her home town of New York for the first time, he says,

Watching her stare landward from the deck long after land had disappeared—on her face that look of fear and wonder I had seen on the faces of so many others who were sea-surrounded for the first time—I felt a sudden surge of love well up in my throat. Nothing so reminds you like the sea that the enemy of life is not death but loneliness. I put my arm around her waist and drew her close to me.  
(472)

He recognizes the awe that the ocean instills, and the loneliness that it can create. But he also recognizes and acknowledges that because his aunt has loved him “unreservedly when [he] had no one else,” (475) he is able in turn to love Kristine. He has learned that loneliness can be counteracted with love, a lesson that echoes what Alexander learned from his grandmother in *No Great Mischief*, “all of us are better when we're loved” (272, 283).

### **Ensllement on the Rock: *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams***

Just as MacLeod's Cape Breton Island shapes his characters through preoccupations with islandness, so, too, does Johnston's Newfoundland mold the character of Joey Smallwood in the



novel *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Based on the story of Canada's last Father of Confederation and Newfoundland's first premier, this book of historical fiction has been hailed as "an epic," and is described by Lawrence Mathews as the "single most important event in the history of Newfoundland literature" (161) and by Bernstein as "a brilliant and bravura literary performance" (3). It has also had its detractors, including Rex Murphy in the *Globe and Mail*, who calls it "novelistic biography" and criticizes it for playing with and deviating from historical record, saying the book "drains and diminishes the Smallwood that so many Newfoundlanders still remember, producing a pastework substitute" (D15). This debate, however, does nothing to lessen the novel's central theme of islandness. Even as Mathews praises Johnston for creating "an imaginary Rock with real people clinging to it," he laments that "Johnston's Smallwood is, in the end, a study in failure—failure to overcome the stacked deck of personal and collective deprivation," (162) deprivation that is created by the fact and the nature of Newfoundland's islandness. Herb Wyile points out that the novel "also underscores, like other contemporary Canadian historical novels, the legacy of colonial repression and disregard that shapes and distorts Smallwood's efforts to guide Newfoundland into the future" (4). *Colony* is both a colonial and post-colonial novel in the most literal of senses.

Throughout the novel, Smallwood's relationship with the ocean defines his relationship with the island, personally and politically, and, ultimately, emotionally. He witnesses Charlie, his father, at their dilapidated house high up on "the Brow," the hill that overlooks St. John's:

On the front deck, he ranted and raved against mankind. . . . But on the other deck, which faced the sea, the object of his wrath was more obscure. God, Fate, the Boot, the Sea, himself. He started out like he might go on for hours, but soon stood staring mutely out to sea, the sea he couldn't see but knew was there, as if

the sheer featurelessness of the darkness he faced had stifled him. (17)

Just as Ted in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* is affected by a debilitating sense of loneliness from seeing the ocean surrounding the island of Newfoundland, Charlie is humbled by the ocean, which leaves him questioning his own existence. Although he is full of rage against his lot in life, and rants and raves against injustice on the front deck that faces the city, the vastness of the sea behind him makes him feel minute and inconsequential, and it silences him. The dark sea, for him, is like his God: he cannot see it but he knows it is always there. In the face of such a featureless vastness, with nothing concrete to fight against, he is stifled, paralyzed with fear and a sense of emptiness that leaves him silent and emotionally bounded. As a child Smallwood witnesses his father's inability to deal with his fears and existential questionings, which contributes to the shaping of Smallwood's own beliefs about the sea and his own emotional boundedness. His stint on the sealing boat *Newfoundland*, where he is helpless to do anything but watch his fellow Newfoundlanders freeze to death, and then is prohibited from writing about it, does nothing to mitigate his dislike of the ocean. In the following passage, he talks about his own relationship with his island, but also about the nature of island identity and of islandness itself:

I never felt so forlorn, so desolate as I did looking out across the trackless, forever-changing surface of the sea, which, though it registered the passage of time, was suggestive of no beginning and no end, as purposeless, as pointless as eternity.

I had never liked to think of myself as living on an island. I preferred to think of Newfoundland as landlocked in the middle of some otherwise empty continent, for though I had an islander's scorn of the mainland, I could not stand the sea. . . . It was not just drowning in it I was afraid of, but the sight of that vast,

endless, life-excluding stretch of water. It reminded me of God . . . Melville's God, inscrutable, featureless, indifferent, as unimaginable as an eternity of time or an infinity of space, in comparison with which I was nothing. The sight of some little fishing boat heading out to sea like some void-bound soul made me, literally, seasick.

On the other hand I was an islander. I thought of my father's stint in Boston, where he had discovered the limits of a leash that up to that point he hadn't known he was wearing. . . . How could you say for certain where you were, where home left off and away began, if the earth that you were standing on went on forever, as it must have seemed to him, in all directions? For an islander, there had to be natural limits, gaps, demarcations, not just artificial ones on a map.

Between us and them and here and there, there had to be a gulf. (131–2)

This passage touches on many of the themes that are central to how an island identity is created. Although Smallwood needs a boundary that only an ocean can give in order to feel secure, he is caught between acknowledging pride in his islandness and admitting his fear of the sea that defines him as an islander. Like his father when he looks at the ocean, Smallwood sees a vast eternity which makes him feel insignificant in comparison. He comments, "Nothing so enisles you like the sea" (389). Yet, fired by a passion that is fuelled by his belief in socialism—and an unrequited love for Fielding—he knows that he *is* something, and takes pride in the fact that he is defined by a boundary that has been made by God and not just a line on a map that has been created by mere mortals. Although there are many ways of being "enisled"—in an isolated community surrounded by wilderness, on a mountaintop, on a desert oasis, or in the heart of a city—Smallwood needs to be defined by the very real edge that the sea creates, by what he calls

the “circumscribed geography of home” (142).

In this passage, Smallwood also refers to his father discovering “the limits of a leash that up to that point he hadn’t known he was wearing,” which Smallwood interprets as a positive aspect of being from an island. Smallwood takes comfort in the fact that he is leashed to his island, compared with mainlanders who are not leashed, suggesting a kind of superiority over them. He likes the idea of having the island’s power exerted over him, and ultimately being governed by this power. He takes pride in it because it contributes to his vision of who he is: an islander who is set apart from the mainland, someone who can “scorn” mainlanders for not being attached to a place like he is, for not having what it takes to survive the deprivations that island life brings. It is, in a sense, a perverse kind of pride, or arrogance, but it is also suggestive of his view of himself as an islander, where, like Devlin Stead, he can derive greater meaning and substance from a self that has been created by the sea, and who can thus take greater meaning from his island identity.

Suggesting that he is on a leash, and in imagery similar to the imagined gigantic tentacles that threaten to hold back James in MacLeod’s “The Vastness of the Dark,” Smallwood describes leaving the island for the first time:

I had intended to stand at the railing of the ship until I could no longer see the island. It seemed like the appropriately romantic thing to do. . . . But though I stood staring at it for what seemed like hours, the island got no smaller. . . . And each time I went back out to see how much progress we had made, we seemed to have made none at all. The dark shape of the island was always there, as big as ever, as if we were towing it behind us. (143)

Like James in MacLeod’s story, Smallwood is held so strongly by the island that he cannot shed

it. He is as bound to his island as his island is bound to him. The island has become an integral part of him, creating a powerful island identity. In other words—paraphrasing the old adage—you can take the boy out of the island, but you can't take the island out of the boy. In forging an island identity, isolation gives a heavy stamp. He says that others are afflicted with a similar predicament: "To leave or not to leave, and having left, to stay away or to go back home. I knew of Newfoundlanders who had gone to their graves without having settled the question, some who never left but were forever planning to and some who went away for good but were forever on the verge of going home" (144). Always the island is calling them, making it impossible for them to be free of their island. Smallwood describes the radio signal fading to static as the boat takes them further from Newfoundland: "[T]here was a change in mood among the passengers, as if we were truly under way, as if our severance from the land was now complete. The radio was left on, though, eerily blaring static as though it were some sort of sea sound" (144). The people want to believe that they can now get on with their lives, being finally separated from their island. But, even so, they do not turn off the radio. It is as if, by turning it off completely, they will have abandoned their island for good, and the island will have abandoned them, leaving them bereft of their island identity, with only the sound of the sea remaining.

Smallwood's time spent in New York is formative, not only because he becomes versed in the tenets of socialism which will later shape his politics and Newfoundland itself, but because the contrast between New York and his home island of Newfoundland is so drastic. Writes Alexander MacLeod, "[T]he geographical portraits of the two countries are unambiguous. American social space, especially New York City, is entirely 'made up,' imaginary, lacking in substance, and unavoidably uncertain. Canada, on the other hand, and especially Newfoundland, is authentic, real, substantial, and metaphysically stable" (7). His five years spent there only serve

to reinforce his commitment and attachment to Newfoundland, which, within its very real boundaries set against the unknown vastness of the sea, has a verifiable and tangible existence.

Since Smallwood's identity is so strongly shaped by his island, it would seem ironic that he should end up in the history books as the man who ended Newfoundland's independence as an island country by making it a dependent province when he brings it into the Canadian Confederation in 1949. On the other hand, perhaps this apparent contradiction is a reflection of Smallwood's dilemma about not liking to think of himself as living on an island and being an islander. This duality is manifested in islanders in various other ways, such as islanders' decisions to stay or leave or their choice to think of their island as either "home" or "prison"—or as schoolmaster Reeves calls it, the "Elba of the North Atlantic" (34). They may refer to it as Hines does: "which once had been my paradise and which I and no one else had made my hell" (197). Or they may be like Smallwood imagining himself seeing Newfoundland from New York in the same way he sees the town of Hermitage: "an inconceivably backward and isolated place, my attraction to which I could neither account for nor resist. The whole island was a hermitage" (144). While feeling superior to and scorning the mainland, he suffers from an inferiority complex, feeling ashamed of his backward place and his inability to resist it. Or perhaps the seeds for Smallwood's ambition to push his island figuratively toward the mainland by literally joining Confederation come from attempts to overcome the guilt he feels when he leaves home for the first time, effectively abandoning his island:

Perhaps we Newfoundlanders had been fooled by our geography into thinking we could be a country, perhaps we believed that by nothing short of achieving nationhood could we live up to the land itself, the sheer size of it. It seemed so nation-like in its discreteness, an island set apart from the main like the island-

nations our ancestors left behind. Perhaps it was not patriotism that drove us on, so much as a kind of guilt-ridden sense of obligation. Yet no sooner had these thoughts occurred to me than I felt guilty for thinking them and chased them from my mind, telling myself I was only looking for an excuse to justify my leaving home, about which I was also feeling guilty. (154)

His guilt leaves him feeling that he must atone for abandoning Newfoundland by doing the only thing he thinks will help rid his island of its problems, namely, to join Confederation.

Smallwood's reference to the island-nations left behind—primarily England and Ireland—are reminiscent of MacLeod's ancestral islands and the strong connections that continue across time and space, which, in turn, remind us of the historical ties—or leashes—that reinforce

Smallwood's burden of responsibility. When it comes to islandness, the personal and the political are combined in a surprisingly intimate way.

In the final analysis, Smallwood himself attributes his ambition to the ocean:

The sea either induced in you a fateful resignation or made you all the more ambitious, restless, determined to accomplish something that, even in the face of the eternal sea-scheme of things, would still endure. I had that abiding sense that something, though tantalizingly close, was out of my reach, but now it seemed to me that it would be for all time. (389–90)

Again, Smallwood returns to that feeling of insignificance in the face of the infinite power of the sea. He could fatefully resign himself to failure, like his father, or he could do something important that would immortalize his name and overcome those feelings of inadequacy and fear. In the end, Smallwood says, "I did not solve the paradox of Newfoundland or fathom the effect on me of its peculiar beauty. It stirred in me, as all great things did, a longing to accomplish or

create something commensurate with it. I thought Confederation might be it, but I was wrong” (552). In a final attempt “to camouflage by great accomplishments” his unrequited love for Fielding, he tries to transform Newfoundland by selling off the island’s resources, the power from the megaproject at Churchill Falls: “By a corridor of conveyance that would carry this power from the wilderness of Labrador to the cities of the south, the gulf between Newfoundland and the New World would at last be bridged” (553). Only by bridging his island to the continent can Smallwood breach the ocean boundary surrounding his island, and only then does he feel successful in overcoming his inferiority/superiority complex about being on an island. But in her journal Fielding outlines the consequences of his actions, accusing, “You all but gave away Churchill Falls” (555). She knows that Smallwood has bankrupted Newfoundland and is leaving it in ruins, like “the masterpieces of some sculptor who worked on a grand scale and whose medium was rust” (555). In the end, the island is literally leashed to the mainland by the cable that gives away Newfoundland’s electrical power, as well as its political power. By allowing the island’s resources to be exploited, he has handed the power over to the controller of the leash, with the result being an island drained of its strength in natural resources, and some of its self-confidence.

While Smallwood’s descriptions of Newfoundland help us to understand the theme of boundedness, so, too, does the novel’s preoccupation with secret identity. Developed through “the Book”—the pompous and definitive history of Newfoundland by Judge D. W. Prowse—many of the novel’s secrets are literally and figuratively bound within its pages—secrets that circumscribe the characters’ entire lives. As Herb Wylie comments in his article, “Historical Strip-Tease: Revelation and the Bildungsroman in Wayne Johnston's Writing,” *Colony* is similar to Johnston’s other works, as it is “preoccupied with protagonists



whose development of a sense of self and search for a place in the world revolves around unravelling some enigma involving parenthood or parental behaviour” (1). In Smallwood’s case, “the Book” contains the inscription that, as a blatant insult actually written by Prowse, marginalizes his father from “the quality,” contributing to Charlie’s garrulous behaviour. It also holds the secret to Fielding getting him expelled from school, which sparks their life-long love-hate relationship and sets him on his path to ambition and greatness. In a darkly absurd incident, “the Book” reinforces Smallwood’s sense of being inconsequential in the scheme of things when Smallwood’s mother throws it off the deck in a fit of rage and frustration stemming from her husband’s obsession with it. This causes a snow avalanche that buries an eighty-three-year-old man who is out for a walk in the middle of the night, “bringing the avalanche down like a judgment on his, and her, head” (73). And of the seven “weighty” books Smallwood carries with him to read on his walk across Newfoundland, two copies are “The Book,” and one is unreadable since the pages had been fused together when it got wet in the avalanche. The other copy he “must have read . . . twenty times,” and “It began to seem that this, and not the walk, was the epic task that I had myself to read the history of my country non-stop, over and over until I had committed it, word for word, to memory, as Hines had done with the Bible, the one book that remained unopened in my suitcase” (214). He reads it like he would read the Bible—which he did not, although to impress the sectionmen and their wives whom he meets, he tells them “that when I thought I could not take another step, I took out the Bible and was inspired by reading it to carry on.” He tells them, “I could not have come this far without it” (215). This is symbolic of Smallwood’s existential questionings and his passion for Newfoundland. In a cruel ironic twist, when a stroke leaves Smallwood bound within his own head, no longer able to read, write, or speak, his family makes for him a recording of “the Book” to which he can listen during his

last days. Says Fielding, “You whose life was one long holding-forth have no choice now but to listen” (555).

It is only fitting, then, that both Fielding and Smallwood feel compelled to write their own very different histories of Newfoundland: hers a condensed, sardonic view of the island, and his a self-published multi-volume set as a bid for immortality. These books reflect their differing senses of island identity—hers an eccentric journalistic report from outside the political establishment, as portrayed further in *The Custodian of Paradise*; and his a political insider’s view as a central character playing a pivotal role in making the island of Newfoundland become an integral part of the Canadian Confederation.

### **“Agnes the Island” in “Island”**

While Johnston’s *Colony* is a sweeping epic spanning the entire island of Newfoundland, MacLeod’s “Island,” published in a collection also called *Island*, is a short story set within the confines of a tiny island which has a population that has dwindled down to one. Both narratives involve brief forays off-island, with Smallwood travelling by train and steamer to New York and Agnes going by fishing boat to her mainland—which is, paradoxically, another island, Cape Breton Island. Yet, despite the differences in scope, the themes are the same: both main characters, Joey Smallwood and Agnes MacPhedran, are confined and bound by their islands. And in that boundedness, both come to be strongly identified with their islands: Smallwood as the first premier of Newfoundland, and Agnes as “the madwoman of the island.”

Indeed, of all the stories and novels written by these two authors, the theme of islanders’ identities being closely connected to their islands is the most literal in “Island,” as the name of Agnes’s island demonstrates:

Gradually, with the passage of the years, the family's name as well as their identity became entwined with that of the island. So that although the island had an official name on the marine and nautical charts it became known generally as MacPhedran's Island while they themselves became known less as MacPhedrans than as people "of the island." Being identified as "John the Island," "James the Island," "Mary of the Island," "Theresa of the Island." As if in giving their name to the island they had received its own lonely designation in return. (376)

As the MacPhedrans lose their last name to the island, it is replaced with "the Island." It is interesting to note the distinction between the designations of men versus women: John is not known as *of* the island as is Mary; rather he *is* the island. This is, no doubt, because "Mary" or "Theresa" are there to play a supporting role to their husbands, the official lighthouse-keepers. This supporting role for women changes, of course, when Agnes's father dies. Because the cheques come addressed to "A. MacPhedran" (ironically, this could also mean "any" MacPhedran), she is able to continue the job: "the sex of A. MacPhedran seemed ambiguously unimportant. After all, she told herself, wryly, her official birth certificate stated that her given name was Angus" (396). Most of her relatives approve of her being the keeper of the light as they are more interested in "'maintaining tradition'" (396) than having to do it themselves; a few disapprove, but not strongly enough to complain to the senders of the cheques.

"Island" describes how the Islanders not only withstand the forces of the outside world, but do so with great dignity. Not surprisingly, given their independent nature, the Islanders' relationship with the "mainland" is never a comfortable one. This island mainland is modern, with cars and shopping centres and people. "On rainy or foggy evenings, it was always hard to see and to understand the mainland, but when the sun shone it was clearly visible," and the lights

from houses and headlights of moving cars make it seem “more glamorous at night, perhaps because of what you could not see, and conversely a bit more disappointing in the day” (371). Over the years, the mainlanders help the lighthouse-keepers with their supplies and in times of need, by turns accommodating and begrudging.

There is a certain irony that the “mainlanders” are also Islanders. Although they think of themselves as superior to the residents of the much smaller MacPhedran’s Island, they, too, must negotiate their lives with the sea. But just as Smallwood scorns mainlanders in *Colony*, these Islanders scorn the MacPhedrans, perhaps criticizing those traits in others which bother them most about themselves. This “degree” of islandness, which appears to become more and more distilled the smaller the island becomes, is, perhaps, like land—and life—becoming more valuable when there is less of it to waste.

It is also not surprising that the island’s physical boundedness is reflected in the Islanders’ emotional states. Like many of MacLeod’s characters, they possess, as Kulyk Keefer calls it, “a tragic knowledge of self and world that is all the more profound for the fact that they cannot speak it” (183). They are emotionally constrained, only rarely expressing joy or despair or talking about what is happening to them. Agnes is unable to tell anyone about her love for the red-haired young man who dies in the lumberwoods before she can marry him—even to save the reputations of both herself and her father when she is found to be pregnant with no other obvious man present to account for it. The MacPhedrans live in what Kulyk Keefer calls “conspicuous silence,” (183) unable to connect with their feelings, with their bound-up emotions mirroring their physical boundedness. At no time do the MacPhedrans consider that, perhaps, life would be easier if they did not live on this island.

Yet, there is a certain pragmatism to Agnes as she takes on the role of the lighthouse-

keeper. She leaves her sickly daughter with her “carping aunt and her mainland family,” knowing “they were right to say that the winter island was no place for a sick child” (393). She dresses in her “father’s heavy, shapeless clothes . . . following easily the rituals and routines that had become part of her since childhood” (394). As Creelman points out, she “defies the communities [sic] standards that govern sexuality and through a process of happenstance forges her own identity as ‘the madwoman of the island’” (137–8). In this way she breaks the boundaries of community expectations.

At the same time, islandness appears to transcend gender in this story. Gender stereotypes blur as Agnes assumes her father’s identity by signing the cheques the same way her father had and by wearing her father’s clothing in order to carry out the physical work necessary to sustain herself on the Island. This blurring of genders occurs, too, in *The Custodian of Paradise*, where Fielding adopts many masculine traits, such as speaking her mind, choosing to be a reporter, and flaunting her alcoholism by drinking publicly from a flask. She realizes that in going by the name “Fielding” she might be mistaken for her father. Because she assumes responsibility for the letter he wrote, it is ironic, then, when she teases him that she might sign *his* name to one of *her* forgeries, to which he shouts, “YOU MUST PROMISE ME THAT YOU WILL NEVER FORGE MY NAME LIKE THAT. NEVER ASSUME MY IDENTITY FOR THE PURPOSE OF MOCKERY OR MISCHIEF OR FOR ANY OTHER REASON” (161). In the end, both women come to be regarded as eccentrics, in part because their islandness has contributed to their breaking the boundary surrounding society’s attitudes toward what women should be.

Just as MacLeod portrays the ocean in its various guises, so, too, does the island have many identities. For generations the island was a place of danger upon which many seafarers had lost their lives in shipwrecks. When the lighthouse is established, the island becomes both a place

of warning *and* refuge. The light has been placed there to “warn sea travellers of the danger of the island or, conversely, that it might represent hope to those already at the sea’s mercy and who yearned so much to reach its rocky shore” (374–5). As well, the island becomes a symbol of isolation, as generations of MacPhedrans tend the light over many years:

In answer to the question of isolation, they told themselves they would get used to it. They told themselves they were already used to it, coming as they did from a people in the far north of Scotland who had for generations been used to the sea and the wind and sleet and rocky outcrops at the edge of their part of Europe.

Used to the long nights when no one spoke and to the isolation of islands. (375)

The MacPhedrans’ Scottish island ancestry mentioned here is significant—just as it is in several other MacLeod stories where characters are part of an important island lineage. Agnes is an integral part of the island’s history, as the omniscient narrator notes: “For by the time she was born the intertwined history of the family and the island was already far advanced” (377). Since so many of her ancestors have lived on islands, carrying the weight of their islands’ isolation and getting “used to” the loneliness, it is as though “islandness” has become part of the family’s genetic disposition, their DNA. A similar idea has been suggested by David Williams in reference to MacLeod’s dogs in the oft-repeated line in *No Great Mischief*: “It was *in* those dogs to care too much and to try too hard” (57). Williams writes, “As it happens, saying and doing carry a common pedigree, as if there could be a bloodline and a voiceline reaching back to Moidart in the Scottish Highlands, almost as if words, like organic cells, could replicate their own DNA” (55). Indeed, the island is so much a part of her history that her life becomes subsumed by it. She feels she has no choice but to remain on the island after her red-haired lover dies, leaving her pregnant, and she must keep up the tradition of keeping the light after her

parents die, because she is “used to” the work. By doing so without complaint, she is keeping the tradition of stoicism alive, too, as the MacPhedrains are always “used to” whatever life throws their way. But for all her stoicism, she is also self-aware as she knows “they were often regarded as slightly eccentric because of how and where they lived. Always anticipating questions about the island’s loneliness” (381). But, as her lover tells her, “Some people are lonely no matter where they are” (381). From those simple words she takes permission not to care that she might be seen as eccentric.

In addition to being known as a place of danger and isolation, the island is known as a place of plenty, to be used as a staging ground from which fishermen exploit the sea’s natural resources. It is for this reason that the red-haired man comes to the island, setting in motion the chain of events that lead Agnes to live the way she does. But the island goes beyond being a place of plenty one summer afternoon. Agnes guides four fishermen to a school of mackerel, which seem like “moving, floating islands, changing the clear, flat surface into agitated areas that resembled boiling water” (398). After the fishermen have filled their boat to the gunnels in a frenzy of fishing, Agnes goes to the shore to meet them, and “they guided the boat across the glass-like sea until its prow grounded heavily on the gravelly shore” (401). They then spend the afternoon having sex with Agnes. But, when they leave, in penance for what they have done, the men throw their catch back into the sea. Because Agnes’s hoped-for pregnancy does not materialize, and there is never an acknowledgement that the event ever happened, the story becomes part of the island’s mythology.

Years pass and Agnes becomes more careless in her appearance, making fewer trips to the mainland, “preferring to try to understand the world through radio” (404). As the world becomes more modernized, the island’s usefulness—and Agnes’s along with it—lessens. The

island becomes a place of myth, around which mainland boat operators offer trips to view “the mad woman of the island” (406). “Standing at the edge of the sea in her dishevelled men’s clothing and surrounded by her snarling dogs, she later realized, she had passed into folklore” (406). From playing a very real and useful role as lighthouse-keeper to becoming a part of folklore, Agnes and the island become a symbol of a passing way of life. The story becomes a lament for the pastoral tradition, a simpler time in which a family is able to lead a life of integrity on a lonely, isolated island, drawing upon their inner resources to survive. The story is a critique of how a life of integration between landscape and the self is destroyed, and, with it, comes the loss of innocence.

In Agnes’s last summer on the island, “She looked across the landscape, repeating the phrases of the place-names as if they were those of children about to be abandoned without knowledge of their names. She felt like whispering their names to them so they would not forget” (407). This is reminiscent of Barry Lopez and his thoughts about “ethical unity,” where he writes: “If you’re intimate with a place, a place with whose history you’re familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you’re there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned” (11). But for Agnes and her island, the deep interaction has ended. The modern world, where lighthouse-keepers are no longer required, has breached the island’s border. Unlike Alexander MacDonald’s island in *No Great Mischief*, where the brothers chisel their names in the rock and savour the sweet spring water in their memories, Agnes’s island is lost and abandoned with no one left to remember it.

The story of “Agnes the Island” has a happy ending: on the day she dies her red-haired lover comes to help her cross the boundary into death. For “Island the Island,” however, the story does not have a happy ending. The boundary of the sea—with its waves and ice and fog



insulating and protecting it from the forces of the outside world—is not strong enough to keep its people there.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Geography of the Psyche in Wayne Johnston's *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat" and "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood"

*All happy families resemble one another, every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.*

—Anna Karénina (1)

#### Homes That Tug Throughout Our Adult Lives

An island is defined by its physical boundary: the ocean that surrounds it and the shoreline that demarcates it, serving as a meeting place between land and sea. An island often depends on this boundary to protect it from environmental, political, or economic shocks, and the degree to which the island is vulnerable depends on this boundary. But, writes island studies scholar Godfrey Baldacchino, "all boundaries are porous. . . . Island studies is very much about the implications of permeable borders" (5). The boundary opens and closes as required, providing the island with a resilience with which to face the forces that affect it. This resilience, says South Pacific writer Epeli Hau'ofa, works best when one looks at how the ocean keeps islanders bounded while at the same time binding them together and with the rest of the world. He speaks to us of his seafaring ancestors who recognized that "Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but also the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it" (30). The strength of this resilience, then, has an impact on an island's success with dealing with these forces—from without and from within.

Just as islands have physical boundaries that mark where they begin and end, so, too, do people have boundaries that define them—both physical and psychological. As David Weale writes in "Chasin' the Shore," "No matter where we live, we are, each of us, an island, with its own shoreline of memory and conscience that seems to define clearly where possibility ends and

danger begins” (3). How porous these psychological boundaries are can determine how resilient individuals are. Are they adaptable enough to let emotions flow through and around them like the tides? Or are they vulnerable to being flooded by everything life throws at them? Or are they trapped inside an emotional shoreline that does not allow anything in or out?

The fiction of Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston is imbued with the theme of emotional boundedness. Indeed, the stories and novels covered in this study all have at least one character who is affected by his or her inability to express emotions. In most instances, this character is a main character. While it is true that stories of human tragedy are the mainstay of literature the world over, with adversity being what Anthony and Cohler refer to as an “integral part of the human condition to be suffered and endured,” (10) MacLeod’s and Johnston’s characters, as islanders, are often intensely troubled because of their interactions with their *island* environment, their *island* families—most often characterized in parent-child relationships—and their *island* communities. Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland may be shaped by their inhabitants, through activities such as farming, fishing, logging, mining, and settlement, but, just as significantly, their inhabitants are shaped by their islands. What is it about island living that has such a powerful effect on these islanders? And why is emotional boundedness such a significant part of these characters’ lives, and, thus, such a major theme in these authors’ stories and novels?

One of the characteristics of island living is its distilled nature. On an island, the scale of life is often smaller, closer together, bounded, and, because of this, life is more defined, not blurred. There is not as much room, physically or metaphorically, for shades of grey—a theme explored in MacLeod’s story “The Golden Gift of Grey.” The distilled quality of islandness contributes to a sense of exaggeration and intensity. Living in a volatile environment such as a

small island, where its inhabitants live close to the sea and are affected by the elements in ways that mainlanders are not, can affect a person's behaviour, where mere survival can become the primary goal. There is a proximity to life and death that prevails from living close to the elements. There is potency and passion, as well as repression and feelings of imprisonment. Living close to the edge, literally and figuratively, where there is little or no stability, can take its toll on humans, leaving little room for happiness and contentment. In some instances, however, these living conditions can serve to create a sense of solidarity and resilience among its inhabitants, where working together to survive brings a certain pride in the accomplishment and, with it, a strengthened identity.

While the influences on childhood identity can be traced a great distance through family inheritance and over a wide range of social forces (the subject of Chapter Three), the starting point in this chapter is the more immediate influence of the family. Children come to know their island at a young age, through their recognition of and attachment to home, and through interactions with family—all of which are paramount in shaping their identity, both positively and negatively. Douglas Porteous writes of the “deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up. . . where we have had particularly moving experiences,” which become “a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves to the world. . .” (43). E. Relph writes of the importance of that security in giving people a sense of commitment to a place, a place in the world that resonates as deep within memory as one can possibly go, and then even deeper into the unconscious. It is a place from which people can venture out into the world, and which they can call home:

To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the

world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere particular. The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multiplicity of experiences and which call forth an entire complex of affections and responses. . . . There is, in fact, a complete commitment to that place, a commitment that is as profound as any that a person can make. . . . (38)

And because islands, with their bounded edges and intense experiences, hold such a powerful attraction for so many, islanders commit to them with a passion and attachment that may not be found so easily on the mainland.

Just as "attachment" and "commitment" to a place are primary reasons that MacLeod and Johnston write about their islands of Cape Breton and Newfoundland, so, too, do they permeate their work as they create their fictional island characters. Porteous's idea that "home tugs throughout our adult lives" (142–3) is a theme that runs through much of their work. Their behaviour as adults has been shaped by their childhood attachments to their place, their islands. MacLeod's MacDonald brothers in *No Great Mischief* are compelled to drive 1,700 miles from Northern Ontario to Cape Breton because they are homesick for their island and "couldn't stand it any longer" (210–1). The grandfather in *No Great Mischief* gets an erection when he approaches the Canso Causeway (116), and the father in "The Return" can barely contain his excitement when he sees Cape Breton from the train after being away in Montreal; he cries, he squeezes his son's hand so tightly it hurts, and he embarrasses his city wife while doing so (80). In *Colony*, when Smallwood sees Newfoundland for the first time on his return from New York, it is with the clarity of a stranger, "separate from me, not coloured by my past or my perceptions," which causes him much "hurt" and "sorrow" and reduces him to tears (211–2).

With all these characters, there is an intensity and poignancy that stems from their attachment to Cape Breton and Newfoundland. In reacting to their “fields of care,” their bodies act of their own volition, in ways that defy logic. Rather, they are grounded in profound emotion borne of their deep connection to their home islands. And if adults happen to have experienced unhappy relationships as children, coming home might reawaken an even greater complexity of emotions, increasing the intensity of their feelings and the poignancy of their homecoming.

While it may be impossible to separate children’s attachment to a physical place from their associations with that place, the world of family dynamics as a landscape unto itself is worth considering in these authors’ works. Children are affected by family structure and rules, both spoken and unspoken, within the home, and they learn how to negotiate their way through this landscape at a young age by learning what is acceptable and not acceptable based on their parents’ reactions. If a parent reacts with open communication and praise, or consistent and fair punishment, a child will learn stability, which contributes to a child being resilient and healthy. If a child is met with such negative reactions as abuse, threats, irony, sarcasm, spitefulness, cruelty, malicious laughter, or teasing, it can lead to a child being vulnerable and unhealthy. As psychologists Werner and Smith have written in their longitudinal study of children in the island of Kawai:

To the extent that children were able to elicit predominantly positive responses from their environment, they were found to be stress-resistant or “resilient,” even when growing up in chronic poverty with a psychotic parent. To the extent that children elicited negative responses from their environment, they were found to be “vulnerable” even in the absence of biological stress or financial constraints. (158)

Consistency is important to children’s development, as they require a reasonable expectation of

what their parents' reactions might be in order to shape their behaviour accordingly. Werner cites Antonovsky in saying that what is needed is "a sense of coherence, a feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environment is predictable and that things will probably work out as well as can be reasonably expected" (163). If the parent reacts inconsistently, such as praise one day and abuse the next, or with an intensity that does not suit the behaviour, then the child may be confused, not knowing what will trigger a certain type of reaction. Often alcohol contributes to this inconsistency.

At the same time, children's own coping mechanisms vary widely, and how children react to their parents' actions can also depend on how "stress-resistant" or "resilient" they are. This resilience may be partly a function of the experience of growing up and living on an island, and the attachment to a home that is bounded and offers security. It may also depend on what Anthony and Cohler call their "interpersonal competence," which is "closely associated with a buoyant self-confidence and realistically perceived self-esteem" (9):

Important facilitating factors include parental pleasure and interest in the child's growing initiative and autonomy, as well as acquisition of sufficient language to issue commands, offer defiance, and express feelings and engage in play with peers, with roles mutually decided upon. The mutual interplay of interpersonal competence and confidence contributes to feelings of relative invulnerability in the face of difficult or disturbing human relationships. (22)

How children cope with parents' reactions becomes a learned response, imprinted on their psyches at an early age. In several of MacLeod's and Johnston's families, this response becomes the children's *modus operandi* in negotiating their way through the family, from childhood to teenagehood to the adults they become. It becomes part of who the children are, part of their

island identity. Their reactions run the full spectrum, anywhere from becoming injured to the abuse or suffering a breakdown, to running away or committing suicide. And, often, the patterns continue with the next generation, thus perpetuating the cycle of what can be labeled “dysfunction,” in the sense of unhappy relationships—mostly within families—where multilayered obstacles such as poverty, violence, scarcity, and absences impede nurturing and successful growth.

The term dysfunction can be defined as a condition where children do not receive the love and support they need to be children. Their boundaries are disrespected and trampled upon, leading many of them to grow up quickly. This may result in problems that are seemingly exacerbated and often exaggerated by living on a small island, which become indelibly etched on their psyches. The cycle can then be perpetuated through succeeding generations. Sometimes children may be “saved” from the ultimate effects of harmful family dynamics if there is a person, usually from outside the family, who throws them a lifeline; this is someone who believes in a child’s inherent goodness or offers just the right words of encouragement at the right time. This may be a teacher; a relative such as a grandparent or aunt or uncle, a girlfriend or boyfriend; or a friend of the family. In MacLeod’s fiction, the grandmother in “The Road to Rankin’s Point” and the father’s friend Everett Caudell in “The Golden Gift of Grey” are two such characters. In Johnston, Uncle Reginald in *The Divine Ryans* and Miss Emilee in *The Custodian of Paradise* are two others.

In all of Johnston’s novels and several of MacLeod’s short stories, we see examples of how children’s home environments affect their identity. Whether they can live up to family expectations, or whether their families are happy or unhappy, are factors in how well children navigate through to adulthood. For instance, it is expected that young Bobby in *The Story of*



*Bobby O'Malley* will become a priest who, vicariously, will live out his mother's dream to become a nun; his friends start calling him "The Rev" and "Your Holiness," and until he turns sixteen he lives his life as if he is to become a priest. Bobby grows into teenagehood in a dysfunctional family, witnessing sarcasm, ridicule, and verbal abuse, where there is no one to turn to when he has doubts and nightmares about becoming a priest. In the end, he breaks away, leaving the island to go to school.

In island communities, it would appear that absent fathers often contribute to a family's unhealthy dynamic. The father has usually left home in order to find paid work to support the family, since a small island, through shortage or lack of resources, offers fewer options for making a living. This leaves the rest of the family to work out a new family dynamic that is disrupted whenever the parent comes home. Children may have to learn new rules every few months. The story, "The Closing Down of Summer," features an entire generation of MacKinnon men who work in mines around the world, leaving their families at home. The narrator describes his relationship with the life he must leave behind. A sadness for what he has lost permeates his words:

It is difficult to explain to my wife such things, and we have grown more and more apart with the passage of the years. Meeting infrequently now almost as shy strangers, communicating mostly over vast distances through ineffectual say-nothing letters or cheques that substitute money for what once was conceived as love. . . . I have attended few parents' nights or eighth-grade graduations or father-and-son hockey banquets, and broken tricycle wheels and dolls with crippled limbs have been mended by other hands than mine. (192–3)

He laments the lack of meaningful communication that comes from being separated from his

wife and children, and he regrets that someone else has acted as a father figure to his children by attending hockey banquets or by fixing their broken toys. Kulyk Keefer interprets the narrator's lament as a "gentle raging against a variety of nights—the narrator's own death, the death of his profession, the silence which prevents the miners from communicating with those they love" (237). Out of necessity the narrator has created a new family, becoming closer to his fellow miners than to his own family as he depends on his workmates for survival. Writes Creelman, "[T]he miners recognize that their collective identity is forged and strengthened by their work as a collective unit and by their joint experience of their Gaelic heritage" (136). There is a certain irony—and therein lies the rub of islandness—that the wives and children who are left behind and who depend on their men going away to support them will never appreciate the kind of work they do. As the narrator says, "Few of us get to show our children what we do on national television; we offer only the numbness and silence by itself. Unable either to show or to tell" (200). Thus, more than just father-child relationships are lost because of their emotional boundedness. The entire mining culture that has traditionally passed from father to son is being lost, too.

It is not only the fathers who leave, however. Sometimes on islands it is the children who leave. Some are forced to make a choice between staying and fulfilling their responsibilities or running away to pursue their own dreams and aspirations. Many of MacLeod's characters run, such as the narrators of "The Boat," "The Vastness of the Dark," and "The Return." They are pushed by the knowledge of what the future on a Cape Breton fishing boat or in a coal mine holds. As the young narrator in "The Vastness of the Dark" says, "I have been somehow apprehensive about even getting off Cape Breton Island, as if at the last moment it might extend gigantic tentacles, or huge monstrous hands like my grandfather's to seize and hold me back"

(45). Most find it difficult to leave, and some, like Wayne Johnston himself, find it even more difficult to come back.

While some are pushed, others are pulled, drawn away from their island homes by the lure of getting an education. MacLeod's story "The Return" offers some insights into what draws family members away to mainland cities—and the forces that keep them there. The story begins when Angus brings his wife and child, ten-year-old Alex, to meet his grandparents and extended family in his home island of Cape Breton for the first time. "We both wanted to go to college so we could be something else," he tells his mother, to which she bitterly retorts, "And what is the something you two became? A lawyer whom we never see and a doctor who committed suicide when he was twenty-seven. Lost to us the both of you. More lost than Andrew who is buried under tons of rock two miles beneath the sea who never saw a college door" (86–7). The decision to follow a different path often causes irreparable damage in individuals and families. Angus's father feels the same way as Angus's mother, ridiculing his son for working for his father-in-law: "I guess in some ways it is a good thing that we do not all go to school. I could never see myself being owned by my woman's family" (85). Angus, too, is torn apart by his decision and by his loyalties that are divided between his new life and family in Montreal and his old life and family in Cape Breton. He feels a disconnect within himself that is causing him to be homesick and anxiety-ridden. Alex witnesses his father's homesickness and his mother's inability to understand Angus's attachment to his island home:

I am reminded of the violin records which he has at home in Montreal. My mother does not like them and says they all sound the same so he only plays them when she is out and we are alone. Then it is a time like church, very solemn and serious and sad and I am not supposed to talk but I do not know what else to do;

especially when my father cries. (80–1)

But Alex is beginning to learn how to negotiate this family dynamic with tact. He feels empathy for his father, yet knows that he cannot show it for fear of upsetting his mother. He goes on to learn much more that summer, such as what he is missing by being an only child who lives away from grandparents and extended family in Montreal. It does not take long before he becomes one of the family:

. . . and when I dawdle behind I suddenly find myself confronted by two older boys who say: “Hey, where’d y’get them sissy clothes?” I do not know what I am supposed to do until my cousins come back and surround me like the covered wagons around the women and children of the cowboy shows, when the Indians attack.

“This is our cousin,” say the oldest two simultaneously and I think they are very fine and brave for they too are probably a little bit ashamed of me, and I wonder if I would do the same for them. I have never before thought that perhaps I have been lonely all of my short life and I wish that I had brothers of my own—even sisters perhaps. (89)

Alex is discovering through his cousins what his life and identity could have been if he had been born and raised on the island. With the bullies’ reference to his “sissy clothes” he becomes aware that child-rearing in Montreal may have some deficiencies. Comparing his cousins’ protection to covered wagons in cowboy movies suggests a siege mentality created by the settler/savage, insider/outsider dynamic—although Alex is aware that he is the outsider here, well out of his depth as the older boys bully him. And even though he is wearing sissy clothes his cousins immediately come to his defence, demonstrating that family or clan loyalty trumps peer pressure

every time. Similar to the MacKinnon miners in “The Closing Down of Summer” and the MacDonald—*clann Chalum Ruaidh*—miners in *No Great Mischief*, the cousins are tribal in nature, loyal to their blood, and just as Calum in *No Great Mischief* does not hesitate to defend his clan—which means accidentally killing Fern Picard—it is their responsibility and duty to protect Alex because he is their blood. The clan provides security and protection for Alex, but he wonders if the blood ties would be strong enough to run both ways and whether he would be able to do the same for his cousins if they were in Montreal. He recognizes the limitations of being an only child and envies their clannishness. He wishes for brothers, and would even condescend to taking a sister if he could have what they have.

That summer, Alex learns the importance of family from his grandparents and cousins, he learns more about his father, and he learns what his father has given up by making the choice to leave. After spending the entire day with his cousins, Alex says, “He is not disturbed that I have stayed away so long and seems almost to envy us our unity and our dirt as stands so straight and lonely in the prison of his suit and inquires of our day” (91). Alex has learned just how much leaving has cost Angus: loss of self-respect and rootedness, ridicule from his parents, imprisonment in a life he may no longer like, and mocking from his wife. And Alex experiences a divide of his own, knowing that he is making a choice, too, by not telling his mother about witnessing the mating of a bull and a cow:

I have never seen anything like this before and watch with awe this something that is both beautiful and terrible, and I know that I will somehow not be able to tell my mother, to whom I have told almost everything important that has happened in my young life. (90)

Indeed, Alex has found himself growing closer to the Cape Breton part of his family while

growing distant from his mother. Like his father before him, he is being forced to make his own choices.

As Alex becomes more cognizant of the family dynamics unfolding around him, the events of the summer imprint on his psyche and begin to shape his personality and view of the world. But often a formative or traumatic experience in childhood will have a much more dramatic impact than Alex watching the bull and cow mate or being attacked by the bullies. More extreme examples include David's slaughter of the capons after MacRae takes Scott away; the suicides of the fathers in "The Boat," *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, and *The Divine Ryans*; the death of the father in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun"; or the abandonment of Fielding by her mother. These experiences can be critical turning points or markers, and may affect children for the rest of their lives. Write Anthony and Cohler, "The risks to which children are exposed are as variable in their severity and nature as the vulnerabilities and resiliences with which the children confront them" (10). In reacting to adverse circumstances, historian Arnold Toynbee's "challenge-and-response theory" has been used by Anthony and Cohler to describe these three responses:

. . . a disintegrating one, characteristic of the most vulnerable societies; a transient disintegration followed by reintegration, as the social group first succumbs to the adversity and then overcomes it; and, finally, the apparent ability to thrive on adversity and come out stronger, more cohesive, and more creative as a result of the exposure to it. (10)

As can be found in many of Johnston's and MacLeod's narratives, reaction to trauma runs along a continuum. Disintegration may result in insanity or suicide, as shown by the sons' reactions to their father being attacked by the pack of wild dogs in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun."

Reintegration, where MacLeod's and Johnston's characters get on with their lives—albeit scarred in some way—is most often manifested in an emotional boundedness, where a person is unable to express feelings and emotions, such as in the narrator of “The Boat.” In later years this may be perceived as being repression, stoicism, or pragmatism—or, as in “The Boat,” the inability to sleep because of the guilt the man feels from choosing to leave the island, thus abandoning his mother. It may also have as its outcome violence or abuse, or it may be exacerbated by alcohol—such as with Fielding in *The Custodian of Paradise*. In a few cases, the characters come out the stronger for it, such as Alexander and Catherine MacDonald in *No Great Mischief*, Devlin Stead in *The Navigator of New York*, Bobby O'Malley in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, and Draper Doyle in *The Divine Ryans*.

On Johnston's and MacLeod's islands, there is no shortage of trauma. In MacLeod's work, the characters seem to come mostly from working-class backgrounds, as most of his stories are set in rural Cape Breton. Occupations such as fishing, farming, mining, and working in the lumberwoods are often the primary means of eking out a living on an island, bringing with them extremely hard physical labour, as well as a sense of precariousness and danger that affects the emotional health and stability of family members. The characters have all been affected by gruesome accidents and violent deaths in the mines, the woods, the fields, and at sea. In contrast, Johnston's novels are set primarily in St. John's and New York, and are peopled with middle-class characters such as doctors, journalists, teachers, businessmen, and priests. Yet his characters seem just as susceptible to violent deaths as MacLeod's, caused often by the social instead of the physical effects of living on islands. For example, the man whom Devlin had believed to be his father, Francis Stead, in *The Navigator of New York*, suffers from an insanity that leads to him murdering his wife, and then being killed himself when he is pushed down a

crevasse while trying to reach the North Pole. Draper Doyle's father commits suicide in *The Divine Ryans*, as he cannot live with his homosexuality. Bobby O'Malley's father does the same in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, giving up and dying of despair from being alone. Fielding has near-death experiences when she is sick with tuberculosis in the San and when she ventures out into a snowstorm while living alone on the section line.

Johnston's and MacLeod's fiction, then, include children who must live in unhappy families, who are pushed or pulled away from their islands by circumstances mostly beyond their control, or who suffer from or who are exposed to formative or traumatic experiences on their islands. All are made more poignant by the children's inability to cope since often there is no good role model present. Again, it can go either way: the bounded nature of the island and its inhabitants may prohibit children from getting the help they need in order to overcome these traumatic incidences and move on. Or the family structure may be strong and healthy enough to provide a stable environment in which to heal after a traumatic event. Some of Johnston's child characters include Devlin Stead, whose mother drowns mysteriously in *The Navigator of New York*; Draper Doyle, whose father commits suicide in *The Divine Ryans*, and Sheilagh Fielding, who is abandoned by her mother in *The Custodian of Paradise*. MacLeod's children include the son whose father falls over the side of the boat while fishing in "The Boat"; the boy whose mother is killed in a car accident in Ontario in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood"; the twins, Alexander and Catherine, whose parents fall through the ice in *No Great Mischief*; Agnes MacPhedran, whose lover dies in the lumberwoods in Maine in "Island"; and the three sons whose father is killed by the big grey dogs in "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun."

MacLeod's child characters in stories such as "The Return" and "In the Fall" are children upon whom and around whom events are enacted. But, more often, they are central characters



who are coming of age, having to make adult decisions with one foot still in childhood. These include the teenage boys in "The Boat," "The Vastness of the Dark," "The Golden Gift of Grey," "To Every Thing There is a Season," and "Winter Dog." There are very few female characters in MacLeod's work—mostly mothers of these boys and young men, and no young girls. Kulyk Keefer notes that those who are there—with the exception of the grandmother in *No Great Mischief*—are "women who must be ruthless in their labour to make ends meet and keep the family together; it is women, too, who are most locked into silence" (184). In his novel, *No Great Mischief*, we follow Alex's story from early childhood through to middle age. While in Johnston's novels we are introduced to the characters of Bobby O'Malley and Draper Doyle as children and adolescents, we follow Joey Smallwood, Sheilagh Fielding, and Devlin Stead from childhood through to various stages of adulthood and, in the case of Smallwood, his death.

What follows, then, is an examination of how the young people in Wayne Johnston's *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and Alistair MacLeod's "The Boat" and "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" are affected, psychologically and emotionally, by varying types of familial structures and traumatic or formative incidences. How are they affected by psychological boundedness—and, more importantly, how do these factors affect their sense of islandness and island identity?

### **Caught in the crossfire while coming of age in "The Boat"**

Perhaps Alistair MacLeod's best-known and most anthologized short story is his first-published, in 1968 in *Best American Short Stories*: "The Boat." Set in Cape Breton, the story is narrated by the youngest and only son in a fishing family and is told from the vantage point of his remembering the pivotal events of his life that have shaped him into the man he is today: a professor in a midwestern university who is wracked with guilt for the choices he has made.

The family seems like a typical Cape Breton fishing family. The father is a fisherman, a quiet man who works long hours to support his family in “the boat.” He married when he was forty and fathered six daughters before having a son at the late age of fifty-six. When he is not fishing, he spends his time in his room, lying on his bed reading paperbacks and smoking, never really sleeping, only dozing. The mother comes from a long line of fisherfolk; indeed, some of her brothers fish with her husband. She is a traditional wife who “ran her house as her brothers ran their boats. Everything was clean and spotless and in order” (5). She toils long and hard, which is the culture of the island: “My mother was of the sea, as were all of her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned with her dark and fearless eyes” (6). She is stubborn and strong, not to be swayed by change or modernity or people she calls “outsiders” (10).

The boy’s earliest memories are of “the boat,” called the *Jenny Lynn* after his mother’s maiden name. He learns early on the importance of the boat to the survival of his family and how his family’s life revolves around it:

She seems to be always repairing clothes that were “torn in the boat,” preparing food “to be eaten in the boat” or looking for “the boat” through our kitchen window which faced upon the sea. When my father returned about noon, she would ask, “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” It was the first question I remember asking as a child, “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” (3)

The boat is the family’s anchor, and the anchor for the traditional way of life that is his mother’s way of life. Boats are also symbolic of island life, and central to islanders’ survival since boats are often the only way to get off an island or means to earning a living. That the boy’s first

memories should be of the boat is indicative of the strength of the family's islandness. For at least his early years, the boy's reality *is* the boat, and he knows he exists because of the boat: the boat is his identity. As the boy grows older, he spends more and more time on the boat, helping his father and uncle with the fishing.

The story's tension comes from the relationship between the mother, symbolized by the boat, and the father, symbolized by books. The father's room is full of books, "a room of disorder and disarray," and the mother "despised disorder in rooms and in houses and in hours and in lives" (8); it was against the cleanliness and order by which she lived her own life. She does not understand books, not having "read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time" (8). She says, "I would like to know how books help anyone to live a life" (10). The children learn about the boat from an early age, but as they grow older they come to discover the books that fill the father's room, books such as *David Copperfield* and *The Tempest*, "all of those friends I had dearly come to love" (17).

As the boy grows older he becomes more aware of the tension in the household. When the mother catches her daughter reading, she says, "Take your nose out of that trash and come and do your work," (9) and the son sees her slap his sister across the face "so hard that the print of her hand was scarletly emblazoned upon her daughter's cheek while the broken-spined paperback fluttered uselessly to the floor" (9–10). There are "bitter savage arguments," (11) and once he wonders if his father might kill his mother when she says to him, "Well, I hope you'll be satisfied when they come home knocked up and you'll have had your way" (11). The father "wheel[s] around on one of his rubber-booted heels and look[s] at her with his blue eyes flashing like clearest ice beneath the snow that was his hair" (11). When the boy finally braves coming into the house, both his mother and father suppress their anger by ignoring the son and each other

and by pretending that everything is as usual. When the boy asks his father, “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” the father merely responds, “Oh, not too badly, all things considered” (12). The boy is witnessing a disconnect between words and actions, but by waiting a few minutes to come into the house, he is instinctively learning to negotiate his way through the emotional land mines set by his parents as their two worlds—a traditional fishing culture versus the modern, educated culture—clash. Eventually the sisters all leave for the city, marrying men whom the mother would never accept because they were not fishermen, and having red-haired children the mother would never see “for they were not of her people and they were not of her sea” (16). Soon the boy is the only one left.

In the winter the boy turns fifteen, life changes. At the age of seventy-one, the father “seemed to grow old and ill all at once” (17). The boy knows he must quit school and help with the fishing if the family is going to be able to survive financially, but he recognizes that he is going to have to make a choice. He says, “I wished that the two things I loved so dearly did not exclude each other in a manner that was so blunt and so clear” (19). That summer he suddenly realizes that his father has spent his life trapped, doing something he did not want to be doing: “. . . that perhaps my father had never been intended for a fisherman, either physically or mentally” (20). He sees for the first time how his father’s skin is irritated by salt water, and he notices the chains he wears on his wrists to keep them from being rubbed raw by the salt water—chains that have become a metaphor for his life. A photo captures the father’s ambivalence toward the ocean, where the “sea was behind him and its immense blue flatness stretched out to touch the arching blueness of the sky . . . he was so much in the foreground that he seemed too big for it” (15). He learns that his father had really wanted to go to university, but in the end had not done so, presumably because he had not had the chance. At the age of forty he

had married the “local beauty” (5) and had to spend the rest of his life supporting a wife and seven children by fishing with his wife’s family. This echoes the grandfather’s words in “The Return,” where he says he “could never see [him]self being owned by [his] woman’s family” (85). The boy recognizes the sacrifice his father has made:

. . . I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. And I knew then that I could never leave him alone to suffer the iron-tipped harpoons which my mother would forever hurl into his soul because he was a failure as a husband and a father who had retained none of his own. And I felt that I had been very small in a little secret place within me and that even the completion of high school was for me a silly shallow selfish dream. (21)

So the son promises him “that I would remain with him as long as he lived and we would fish the sea together” (21–2). The father replies, “I hope you will remember what you’ve said” (22). On the last run of the season the father lets himself fall over the stern of the boat, committing suicide to keep his son from making the same mistake he did. The father has made the son’s choice for him.

The narrator of “The Boat” is a young man caught in the crossfire: between his mother and his father, between tradition and modernity, and between choosing to do the right thing and choosing to do the wrong thing—but not knowing what the right thing is. As Kulyk Keefer notes, “[T]o leave is to betray a fiercely unforgiving mother; to stay is to reject the only gift it is in a father’s power to give—encouragement to feel both the annihilating labour exacted by the sea and the mines, and the kind of marriage in which tenderness and joy become impossible luxuries. One is a traitor whether one goes or stays” (234). His mother symbolizes the old ways of keeping

alive the traditional family culture of fishing, and is embittered because “no man goes from her house, and she alone of all the Lynns has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea” (25). His father represents fulfilling one’s destiny, using the gifts one is given. He wants only the best for his children, including his son, which is to avoid the mistake he has made by choosing to marry and to stay. Only by making sure his son does not follow in his footsteps does he know that his life was not a waste, was not lived in vain.

That place between childhood and adulthood is a powerful, impressionable place, one of anxiety and tension. The boy witnessing his father’s death—and knowing the sacrifice the father has made for him—is forever imprinted on him. As an adult he is filled with guilt, and awakens in fear at 4 a.m., thinking that he has overslept and that his father and his uncles are waiting impatiently downstairs for him to get up so they can head out to the boat. He gets up and goes to the all-night diner where he sits and smokes and drinks coffee, thinking about what he has done to his mother because he has followed his dream; thinking that he is not nearly as courageous as his father who did not follow his dream, yet knowing that his father’s sacrifice would have been in vain if he had stayed. That there *was* much left of his father is suggested in the closing lines of the story: “There was not much left of my father, *physically*, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair” (25). What was left was his legacy: a son who would become something other than a fisherman.

The story, narrated by a guilt-ridden adult, shows just how powerful this childhood family conflict and trauma have been. He is paying a price for his choice. He says, “And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue” (25). As Creelman writes, “MacLeod focuses on the lonely trials of isolated individuals who exercise their limited personal freedom to

achieve only an incomplete sense of connection with their larger society” (128). Both father and son have had to make choices, but the ways of the island—its fishing culture and heritage—do not offer many options when it comes to exercising personal freedom. The island, then, has been largely responsible for shaping the identities of both of these men, as well as the mother. Their choices lead them both to places where they feel incomplete: the father to his room to read and the son to the all-night diner. The mother has chosen to stay in her traditional culture rather than accept what her children have become. The choices of the father, and of the mother, are forever etched on the soul of the son.

### **Dysfunction in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley***

Just as “The Boat” is narrated from the point of view of an adult remembering his first sixteen years, Johnston’s first novel, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, published in 1985, is written from the perspective of a young adult remembering his first sixteen years growing up in the 1960s and early 70s in Kellies, just outside St. John’s. The book begins with his earliest memories and ends when he leaves home at the age of sixteen, with a two-sentence reference to “this story [that] goes on past these pages,” (190) suggesting that the story has a happier ending than its beginning. The book’s back cover describes the book as “exploring how memory is shaped. . . ,” weaving Bobby’s memories of incidents with his impressions of those memories, or, as Richard Knowles says, “. . . it concerns itself with the process of memory, dream and narrative, processes through which mind tries to connect with world” (93). The end result is the story of a dysfunctional family that is at once hilarious and heartbreaking, told from the vantage point of the emerging artist who is trying to connect his memories with a world that has been shaped by islandness.

And, just as the roots of an unhappy family dynamic in “The Boat” lie in the emotional

boundedness of the boy's parents, and are created by their islandness, the foundation of the O'Malley family's dysfunction can be found in the emotionally bounded characters of Bobby's parents, Agnes and Ted. It is a boundedness that stems from their own view of the world on an island and the dynamics of their island community. Agnes is a devout Catholic; indeed, she has plans to become a nun, but, for reasons not explained, she changes her mind at the last minute. Having grown up on a small island, Agnes would know the dynamics of island communities where everyone knows everyone else's business, and that her decision to leave the convent would be an open, but whispered, secret. Similarly, the Church whispers: it is full of "fire and brimstone, the more subtle Catholic kind, not hurled from the pulpit, but whispered" (29). Agnes's behaviour suggests that she feels great guilt and shame for making this decision, punishing herself by setting herself apart from everything that might bring her joy and anyone who might bring her comfort. When "accused of being beautiful," (23) she deliberately makes herself unattractive, using "harlot-red lipstick," covering her face with powder, and highlighting a "redeeming blackhead or pimple" with an eyebrow pencil. She reeks of perfume, like "a woman under siege, behind a fortress of fragrance. She was like a planet, with an atmosphere all her own," (24) and, according to her husband, she wears a "construction bra" that is "applied to the body very much like a plaster cast" (23) and a girdle that gives her "that steel-belted look" (24). She has an aversion to germs, believing that "the body was a breeding-ground . . . that we had to keep a proper distance between ourselves and others. . . ." and to "imagine ourselves encased in a sterile bubble, and let no-one inside it" (112). She has placed herself, like the island on which she lives, behind a barrier that is virtually impregnable, and does everything within her power to keep the world at bay.

When she cries, Bobby tries to comfort her, but she rebuffs him. "I went over, intending



to put my arms around her neck and try to stop the shaking of her shoulders, but, her face bursting red round the edges of her fingers, she jerked her whole body away when I touched her” (19). Bobby says he knows why his mother cries; it is “a sound like sadness coming in, as if through a crack in the house” (53). He describes it as something breaching the barrier she has constructed. She remains trapped inside, crying “like a woman who no longer believed that others could hear her, like one contained by the sound of her own voice” (54). On another occasion, Bobby “in a panic” chases after his crying mother when she abandons him in the dark, slipping and sliding in the slush, trying to give her her purse, finally catching her, and “now that she is again my mother, I begin to cry. . . . The wind gusted, and the cold, sweet smell of perfume wrapped around me like a hug. . . . ‘We won’t tell your father, will we?’ she said. . . . We began to walk home together, hand in hand, having, for the first time, agreed that some things are best forgotten” (33–4). Bobby has breached the barrier for the moment, likening the cold, sweet-perfumed comfort he receives to a hug, but the mother just as quickly creates another barrier, where she and Bobby are inside it keeping the secret from her husband, who is left on the outside.

From her erratic behaviour and constant crying, Agnes appears to be always on the edge of a breakdown. She enisles herself in the battle against her own demons that have their roots in religion and repressed sexuality. We eventually learn that it is ten years before she allows her marriage to be consummated because of what Ted describes as “emotional problems,” (168) and even then it is only once, as she is “saying the rosary” (169) on the vertebrae on her husband’s back. This is the night that Bobby is “made” (167). Agnes thinks that all women are “latent nuns” and likens her husband to a habit that nuns wear: “all women are Sisters of Mercy—it’s just that each one wears her habit a different way” (18). Unstable as a mother, she is often not present for

her child, or rejects him outright, rarely offering him comfort and not allowing him to offer her any either. Bobby says, “Watching her like that was like touching someone who was fast asleep” (156). This kind of parental abdication or abandonment makes Bobby an orphan in his own family, enisling him, too.

The father, Ted, is the TV weatherman, which, on an island, where weather is a force that binds islanders together, should be a job that allows him to be an integral and respected part of island society. Indeed, weather forecasts are a part of MacLeod’s world, too, with Calum saying, “I listen to the national weather forecast every morning to check on the Cape Breton weather. . . . I guess we were so close to it for so long. . . .” (186). However, as Bobby remarks, “In our town my father was both shaman and scapegoat. . . . people seemed to believe that my father not only forecast the weather, but somehow controlled it. . . . Whatever way you looked at it, he was an enemy of the people” (22). Their treatment of him contributes to his feelings of marginalization and loneliness.

Ted has a brilliant sense of humour, but as a parent he is no more effective than his wife. Indeed, he behaves like an adolescent who has never grown up. From the vantage point of adulthood and through the filter of memory, Bobby tries to define his father, saying, “How deceptive language is. Oxford defines ‘father’ as ‘male parent’ and adds the qualification—‘one who deserves filial reverence.’ The word is not quite adequate” (6).

Just as Agnes’s emotional boundedness is caused by cultural factors that stem from living on an island, Ted is affected by an existential loneliness that is sparked by seeing another part of the ocean when he moves from his home on the south coast of Newfoundland to attend Normal School in St. John’s:

The sun was low, and wind was blowing through the narrows. And it was true, as

he'd all his life suspected, that the sea 200 miles from home was different. The water was a different colour, and the wind looked different on it. It was then, he said, he knew he needed company. (189)

Ted is outside his comfort zone of home and describes where he is in terms of the ocean that surrounds him. He knows that he cannot survive alone beside this different ocean. These lines are similar to those in *The Navigator of New York*, where Devlin realizes, "Nothing so reminds you like the sea that the enemy of life is not death but loneliness" (472). Shortly afterwards Ted meets and marries a vulnerable Agnes who has just left the convent. Bobby laments their relationship: "The thought of a love that great, that relentlessly enduring, made me wonder where the love had gone" (169). Ted attempts to make the marriage work, trying to break down the barriers his wife has built as a devout Catholic by joking and cajoling. But, in the end, as Jeanette Lynes says, "he possesses no real vocabulary to account for his own existence or to articulate his own suffering . . . . Ted's dark play ultimately points toward nothingness: the meaninglessness that he sees as his life" (145).

Eventually their conversation is reduced to verbal sparring filled with sarcasm and innuendo, which often catches Bobby in the middle:

The problem with Mary Hart, my father said, was that her germs were bigger than mine. Her germs were "bully germs" that had been lifting weights and jumping rope since birth. My mother denied this, saying that Mary's germs were not bigger, "just more numerous." . . . She said that, on the night of the concert, I was to kiss Mary Hart with my mouth closed tightly. And afterwards, my father said, I must douse my head with disinfectant, or pour boiling water down my throat. Or better yet, why not hose down Mary Hart before the play, or get the exterminator

to give her a good going over? (112)

Ted's words are meant to be a joke, but they have a sharp edge to them that borders on cruelty as Agnes tries to counter his jokes with logic. Bobby, caught between, is being used as a focal point for their anger. Yet at the same time Bobby knows they depend on one another, "needed one another to bring down the dark, as curtains to close upon a window," (53) curtains that will shut out the world and leave them alone. He knows instinctively how barriers can create a safe cocoon, saying, "Winter storms have been all things for me. Back then, they brought people together and would not let them go away. They had my mother and father, for a while, live life as I lived it—within walls, safe inside the storm. I loved it when a storm closed in, when the world got smaller and smaller until it seemed our house was all there was" (22).

But just as islands can be prisons as well as paradise, Bobby recognizes the pain and loneliness found within the prison of those barriers:

. . . the loneliness that must have been there every day like a wall of skin-stripped flesh between them, too raw to touch or even talk about—all that was lost. . . .

They broke the wall down once, and it went back up when I was born. Now it seemed they thought a person was nothing if not alone. How to live in that zone of pain that people close together share, they had no idea. Nor had I. (168)

He observes his father's way of dealing with the pain: "Until that night, my father had managed to keep himself between hope and hopelessness. He found some neutral middle, some zero from within which he beat back both sides" (169). He notices the dynamics: "The world was changing. What had been a field of battle between my mother and father was becoming a no-man's land" (53–4). And he witnesses his mother finally yelling at his father: "'Teddy, she said, 'GROW UP OR GET OUT'" (155). Rather than grow up, Ted chooses to get out: he commits suicide.

Although Ted has the potential to be a stabilizing influence in the family, like Uncle Reginald in *The Divine Ryans* whose sense of humour and “oralysis sessions” with Draper Doyle offset Aunt Phil’s bullying, he is too much of an adolescent to be a responsible father. He lacks the courage to stand up to his wife, usually acquiescing to her beliefs. For instance, because his mother disapproves of borrowing money, the family constantly moves from rented house to rented house, living in eight houses by the time Bobby is sixteen, contributing to Bobby’s unstable home life. Lynes calls this their “marginal existence on the fringes of the town—living in all the neighborhoods but never really part of them, a ‘neutral zone’” (147). This lifestyle symbolizes their individual lives lived marginally, separately, and never really together as a family. Richard Knowles says, “the family’s constant search for a place to buy, to settle, is an ironically unsettling narrative of its dissolution” (92).

Both Bobby and his father are affected by Agnes’s erratic behaviour, “We were always waiting in the darkness, he and I, for the world to wake. Each of us, alone, in some separate part of the house, we waited for my mother to come out of her room, eyes blinking back to the light so that life could start again” (19). Ted idolizes his wife: “And he did seem full of wonder, and sadness, at the fact that such a saint should be his lot in life” (169). Both father and son are isolated from the mother and from each other, Ted because of his emotionally bounded state and Bobby because he is a child who does not yet have the resources to break free from the unhealthiness surrounding him.

Ted is never mean to Bobby, but his humour is sometimes humiliating and mocking. For example, Bobby is afraid to sleep without a light on, so his mother calls him a “sookie”: “. . . only sookies were afraid of the dark. ‘Sookie calves,’ my father said. At breakfast, he would moo at me. ‘Mooooo—ooooo,’ he’d say, until I started bawling” (10). When Bobby was a baby just

learning to crawl, Ted would set him on the floor at his feet, where Bobby would fall asleep. Ted would get up and walk around, not realizing that the baby was wrapped around his foot. “When at last my hand came free, he would not stop to pick me up, but would simply leave me there. My mother recalled finding me in all sorts of strange places—under the bathroom sink, on my back beside the stove” (8). When Bobby was older, Ted would play with him, engaging in potentially dangerous behaviour such as sliding on the shiny waxed floors until they inevitably fell, or down the stairs of their rented homes on pillows strapped to their backsides—him in the “Teddy-tank” and Bobby in the “Bob-sled” (69). While playing should be a part of good parenting technique, Ted’s arrested development, stopped somewhere in adolescence, is not a healthy or normal place for a father to be and it shows in the type of play Ted initiates. In not being allowed to be a child, Bobby has echoes in Wordsworth: “the child is the father of the man.” Ted’s behaviour leaves its imprint on his son, contributing to Bobby’s insecure identity.

Bobby reacts to this dysfunctional situation by setting himself apart. As a boy with a higher than average IQ, “Books were worlds [he] could escape to, and [he] read [his] favourites over and over” (116). At school he would “curl up at the drop of a whisper, or sideways look, or laugh behind my back. Whether the talk, the looks, the laugh were meant for me I neither knew nor tried to find out. I clung to myself like a piece of driftwood” (57). The priest observes that Bobby is too withdrawn and awkward to become an altar boy: “. . . the way Father put it, you’re always off in another world. You’re a dreamy little boy, he said” (72). His mother contributes to Bobby’s separateness by shielding him from learning about the world: “My mother for my sake neutered the universe. She wove a web of conscience round my mind and, every day when she got home from work, went one by one through the words it caught, wielding guilt like a fly-swatter” (49). Bobby says, “I was my mother’s little bloodhound, able to sniff out mustn’t-touch-

its, able to tell a thing was bad, without even knowing why” (60). Later, Bobby mimics his mother’s behaviour by setting himself apart from his schoolmates by “develop[ing] a kind of compensating wit”; Lynes says, “what Bobby is compensating for is his isolation” (147). His father calls him ““an oasis of intelligence, an island of culture, alone among men. In short, a snob”” (109). The father interprets Bobby’s silence and withdrawal as snobbery, undercutting his son by mocking him, when, in fact, Bobby’s behaviour is his way of coping with the dysfunction that surrounds him.

The novel’s secondary characters, including Bobby’s relatives and school friends, are generally offbeat and outcasts like Bobby. His friend Gabriel is in a wheelchair and, like Bobby, is isolated: “encased in one-way glass. He could see out, but not get out—and no-one could see him” (42). Gabriel’s chair mirrors Bobby’s position in his family: he could see that his life was not normal, but he was too young to remove himself. And he was invisible to his parents and most of his relatives and teachers. Only his cousin Ambrosia, “a tattletale of unusual ability,” (47) seemed to be able to see the real Bobby, and her ability just made him detest her more. Gabriel is, as Lynes suggests, “the figure of the outsider who is persecuted by society and who attempts, without success, in Gabriel’s case, to compensate through some kind of inventive tactic” (148). Gabriel foreshadows Johnston’s later character of Fielding the outsider, with her limp and her cane. Her compensating inventive tactic will be her ability to skewer people with her wit.

In high school Bobby surrounds himself with other outcasts, named Kiwi, Tommy, Little Lawrence, and D-Cup. Their primary preoccupation is girls and sex, and trying to penetrate the secrecy that surrounds girls and sex. Their awareness of living on an island is captured in their attitude: “Having a boyfriend on the mainland was about as stuck-up as you could get” (111).

Even their teachers seem eccentric, such as Brother Noonan, who, like schoolmaster Reeves in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, likens Newfoundland to the prison island of Elba: “Here on this rock-bound Elba of the North Atlantic, here, under the ceaseless howl of storm and gale, give me a boy who will make a mark on the rock” (125). With these friends he is able to do more of what normal teenagers do, separate from his family. It is within this circle of misfits, where he has created a new identity for himself, that Bobby realizes that he does not want to be a priest and he is finally able to break free of his family and their expectations.

Bobby knows that all around him people are keeping secrets, some innocent, such as his Aunt Dola’s leg, “kept hidden by long dresses and euphemisms. She was unlike other women only in having one more unmentionable,” (27) and some not so harmless, like Ted’s affair: “The silence between them was hours old. My mother smiled at me, the way adults at funerals smile at children, as if I were an imbecile, whose delusions of happiness must be left intact” (87). Bobby interprets people’s reactions toward this scandalous open secret in the community: “Always on record, though never spoken, was a statement of my father’s absolute worthlessness” (104). Religion, too, plays its part in keeping the secrets beneath the surface: “The nuns spoke often of hell, their words like sighs. They spoke in my dreams when I was eight. I think I would have preferred an evangelistic onslaught, full of fury and damnation, and apocalyptic final judgment. At least, then, things would have been out in the open” (29).

From the vantage point of an outsider, Bobby recognizes the façade created by the people in his community, which is reinforced through the Catholic religion, and he sees the layers of truth which are bounded within. No one wants to speak the truth in case the illusion of politeness is shattered and control is lost. Even the Church, which ought to provide comfort and stability, does not. Bobby observes, “This change in tactics, this shifting of the beast from without to



within, was someone's idea of humanizing the faith. It was supposed to signal a newer, more healthy approach to religion. . . . Certainly it was a bad time to be a little Catholic boy, trying to keep blasphemous doubts at a distance. For, if one thing was changed, why should not everything be changed?" (30). The instability, self-doubt, and guilt created by the Church only makes things worse for Bobby. He must negotiate his way through the land mines of secrecy, which contributes to how he sees himself: alone and an outcast.

These kinds of secrets can cause irreparable damage, particularly to a young boy who has to constantly adapt to his parents' moods and arguments, like sand shifting beneath his feet. When Bobby's mother discovers Ted and Harold's mother sliding down the stairs naked in the "Teddy tank," she accepts Ted's affair, and even becomes complicit in it. But when an eight-year-old Bobby witnesses them naked on a blanket outside in the woods, he is frightened by his father's behaviour and decides to run away. While in the woods, he experiences once more his recurring nightmare of "the hag," after which his mother "wondered if becoming an altar-boy might not make a man of me" (67). This inadvertently sets him on the path toward becoming a priest when his father jokes that desperate measures are necessary: "Tell him he's decided he wants to be a priest" (73). His mother takes her husband seriously, and soon everyone knows that Bobby wants to be a priest. Bobby is too stunned by this news to tell anyone that there has been a mistake. Bobby soon becomes known as "The Rev" or "Your Holiness" (75) and his teenage identity becomes that of the boy who is going to become a priest. It is only when he is sixteen and gets drunk after his father's death that he admits to anyone, including himself, that he does not want to become a priest—a catharsis that enables him to break free of everyone's expectations and allows him to create his own identity and get on with his life.

As Ted becomes more and more despondent, Bobby's mother continues to hold herself

apart: “I thought of going to him, but my mother told me not to. I don’t say she took revenge for the times *she* cried alone, only that, in her rise, his fall, there seemed to be her neat justice, from the full appreciation of which she would not be kept” (169). Even after she discovers Ted’s body in the snow-covered car where he has died from carbon monoxide poisoning, Agnes is more concerned about appearances than about her husband or son: “She didn’t knock on the window or try to get inside. All she could think of was that no-one must see him” (174). She maintains her barrier, symbolized by moving the snow back into place, filling in the cracks, and going inside to make breakfast for her son. After the funeral, mother and son cannot acknowledge openly what has happened: “After a while, my mother went to her room, and I went to mine. And we waited, each of us, for the sound of footsteps coming. In the end, she came to me. . . . He was very much there between us, a distance we couldn’t cross” (182). The mother finally reaches out to Bobby, but by then it is too late for either of them. Both are imprisoned within their walls of silence and grief, unable to communicate.

A year after his father dies, Bobby leaves the island. He says,

I was surprised to find that, like me, most of the people on the ferry had never been off the island before. Some people were leaving for good, and they were crying. Others had been home to visit, and they were crying, too. Those like me, who were only going for a while, should have been able to help themselves. . . . It was true, as I heard one of the stewards say, long after the lights of home had disappeared, “The whole boat-load was bawlin’ and wavin’ like lunatics.” (190)

He cries along with everyone else, but he knows the only way of escaping the dysfunction is by escaping the island:

A year later, I went away to school. Most importantly, I went away. For often

since, the pier at Port aux Basques receding, the land assuming shapes and lines,  
I've thought that only by leaving did I learn to live here. (190)

The island is reduced to mere “shapes and lines” which, by their simplicity and functionality, make it easier to see what has happened more clearly and process the dysfunction that happened on the island. Unlike his father, who went as far as St. John’s when he left home only to find a different-looking ocean, Bobby must literally separate himself from his family and the island before he can build his own sense of self and move on with his life. From the vantage point of adulthood, Bobby can see the role he has played in his parents’ lives: “A thing between two things can join them or keep them apart, can mediate or separate, depending. My father and mother had me between them” (190). He figuratively severs his relationship with his father, purging himself of what Lynes calls “his father's oppressive inventive tyranny” (143) by burning the video tape of his father's last weather forecast in the toilet. And he literally severs his relationship with his mother by leaving. He realizes that it is only in doing so that he is able to go back, noting that he is friendly when he visits his mother in Kellies: “but that is no ending—more like a beginning, I should think” (190). Despite all that has happened to him, Bobby is smart enough to know that he needs to leave in order to survive. Like Stephen Daedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Bobby chooses life over the priesthood. And, because of his artistic sensibilities, he is resilient enough to be able to survive, write the story, and return.

Not coincidentally, Smallwood uses similar words in *Colony*: “I tried to convince myself that I was ready to return, that only by leaving had I learned to live here” (211). This echoes Johnston’s own words about his relationship with the island, found in *Baltimore’s Mansion*: “I can only write about this place when I regard it from a distance” (236). Only by leaving has Johnston been able to process his relationships with the island and its inhabitants, reducing it to

the “shapes and lines” that eventually become his books.

### Functioning in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”

In sharp contrast to Bobby O’Malley, MacLeod’s character John in the story “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” provides an interesting counterexample to the dysfunction portrayed in island society. John has managed to function well in circumstances that, by any measure of tragedy, should have led to an unhealthy family dynamic. Instead of being adversely affected by the circumstances of his life, however, the eleven-year-old seems like a well-adjusted child who is thriving in his island setting.

This story is set in Newfoundland, interestingly the only one of MacLeod’s stories not set in Cape Breton. It concerns a thirty-three-year-old folklorist from a midwestern university who has for the first time come to see his son John in his outport Newfoundland community. John, it turns out, is being raised by his grandparents. Eleven years previously the protagonist was a graduate student collecting folklore in Newfoundland, staying as a guest in this house. He has a brief affair with their teenage daughter Jennifer, who becomes pregnant; but for reasons not stated, the couple do not get together, a situation echoed (seemingly innocently) in the old folksong song John and his grandparents sing for the man: “*Come all ye fair and tender ladies / Take warning how you court your men / They’re like the stars on a summer’s morning / First they’ll appear and then they’re gone*” (129). At some point Jennifer moves to Toronto, leaving her son behind with her parents, but when John is nine, and Jennifer is newly married, the grandparents feel that John should rightfully be with his mother, so they send him to the city. “‘When she married in Toronto,’ he [the grandfather] says at last, ‘we figured that maybe John should be with her and her husband. That maybe he would be having more of a chance there in

the city.” (134) But it does not work out. Says the grandfather, ““Well, what was wrong was that we missed him wonderful awful. More fearful than we ever thought. Even the dog. Just pacing the floor and looking out the window and walking along the rocks of the shore. Like us had no moorings, lost in the fog or on the ice-floes in a snow squall”” (134). The unsatisfactory arrangement is as true for the boy as it is for the grandparents. ““Anyway, they could have no more peace with John than we could without him. Like I says, he was here too long before his going and it took ahold of us the way it will”” (134–5). John returns to his grandparents, and when Jennifer and her husband are killed that same night in a car accident in Toronto, John remains with them.

When the narrator unexpectedly shows up, driving his rented and battered Volkswagen 2,500 miles, the grandparents are fearful that the man will take the boy away. The grandmother, whose “eyes are as grey as the storm scud of the sea,” (127) “contain only mild surprise as she first regards me. Then with recognition they glow in open hostility, which in turn subsides and yields to self-control” (128). Presumably the narrator has come to claim his son, but it is not clear whether it is out of guilt or a sense of responsibility, or because he truly longs for him.

It only takes a few hours for the narrator to get to know his son. John tells the man about his life at school and his music and fishing, describing how he seems to have a natural aptitude for fishing:

“John here has the makings of a good fisherman,” says the old man. “He’s up at five most every morning when I am putting on the fire. He and the dog are already out along the shore and back before I’ve made tea.”

“When I was in Toronto,” said John, “no one was ever up before seven. I would make my own tea and wait. It was wonderful sad. There were gulls there

though, flying over Toronto harbour. We went to see them on two Sundays.”

(129)

It soon becomes obvious to the narrator that John belongs here. John’s painfully honest words, “wonderful sad,” show just how aware he is about how much he missed his outport life, how much the island is ingrained on his psyche.

And after seeing the wonderful life the boy leads in this tiny community and the obvious respect and love he has for his grandparents, in the end the man does not try to take him. The lost salt gift of blood in the title acknowledges the importance of ancestry, and of the sea that is in the blood. With no small sense of irony, including the definition of “successful,” the man says,

And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my *summa cum laude* loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze where you may sleep till ten of nine. And I will show you the elevator to the apartment on the sixteenth floor and introduce you to the buzzer system and the yards of the wrought-iron fences where the Doberman pinscher runs silently at night. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my collecting and my most successful life? (139)

This brutally self-ironic tone betrays the narrator’s self-knowledge of how shallow his life is compared with the richness of John’s on the island, by a harbour that is “very small and softly curving, seeming like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing the life that now lies within it but which originated from without” (119). He witnesses how these people live the kind of life that he can observe only from the outside, a fact emphasized by his occupation as a collector of folklore. Theirs is a life in tune with nature and their environment, following the rhythms of the seasons. It is a life lived believing in superstition and portents. It is a life lived with harshness and beauty:

The grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise marauders. Everything before them and beneath them has been rapidly, briefly and thoroughly drenched and now the clear droplets catch and hold the sun's infusion in a myriad of rainbow colours. (118)

His, on the other hand, is lived with the convenience of buzzers and elevators, inside a fence with a dog that keeps people out. He knows he is an outsider: "I attempt three or four more casts and then pass the rod back to the hands where it belongs." He acknowledges that this is "[n]o place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots. Perhaps no place for me at all" (123). He recognizes that he is "[m]aking myself perhaps too much at home with this man's glass and this man's rum and this man's house and all the feelings of his love. Even as I did before" (136). He is "successful," but he knows that the success has come with a price and he is just learning what the price is: giving up his son.

Before the narrator leaves, the boy gives him a gift of a stone polished by the sea: a metaphor for the child's life lived in a state of near perfection itself:

He opens his hand to reveal a smooth round stone. It is of the deepest green, inlaid with veins of darkest ebony. It has been worn and polished by the unrelenting restlessness of the sea, and buffed and burnished by the gravelled sand. All of its inadequacies have been removed, and it glows with the lustre of near perfection. (140)

The gift of the stone seems ironic at first, as "the lost salt gift of blood" appears to be the gift the man is giving the boy: by leaving him here on the island with his grandparents, the man is giving the boy a gift of life filled with love, with blood, with ancestry. Yet the *boy* is giving the *man* a gift. Because it is given so innocently, unbidden, and from the heart, the gift allows him to

acknowledge to himself that he is doing the right thing by leaving the boy there. Like the Celtic knot, the never-ending circle, the gift has come full circle. Writes Arnold Davidson, “The almost perfect stone from the cold salt shore that the father carries back to the shimmering heartland of the continent sums up, then, the sorrow of his loss even as it also embodies the enduring salt gift of blood, the paternity that demands—an additional gift—it not be acknowledged” (37). This act of giving the stone is in sharp contrast with the last scene in the story where the man witnesses a fellow traveller being greeted by his children at the airport with “What did you bring me?”, sharply reminding the reader of the contrast between the child’s natural world and his own commercially artificial one.

Like other MacLeod stories, and, in particular, the novel *No Great Mischief*, the grandparents in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” are raising the child. In much of MacLeod’s writing, grandparents play an important role in nurturing the next generations, either by serving as important role models in the extended family, or by raising the children directly out of necessity because the child’s parents have died or are forced to work away. Beyond what grandparents can give the child—time being among the most precious gift—grandparents represent a continuity of inheritance that provides succeeding generations with ancestral memory and a sense of rootedness, which are important contributors to a sense of island identity.

Like many of MacLeod’s stories, “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” is an elegy to a way of life that draws upon ancestry and a traditional lifestyle to create a sense of cohesiveness and a strong island identity. The family lives a simpler life where fishing and playing with animals and being closely connected to nature are the characters’ primary activities. The adults are typically stoic and do not talk about their emotions (not without some rum for fortification), but they tell stories and sing the old Gaelic songs as a way of communicating how they feel and to ensure that



the grandchildren know their roots and where they have come from. Indeed, as Kulyk Keefer notes, MacLeod “often seems to sing rather than tell his stories. . . he achieves that haunting and powerful resonance characteristic of the Gaelic music which is his characters’ best means to self-expression and communication” (182); couching their emotions in old Gaelic songs is also less threatening than talking about them. With more echoes of *No Great Mischief*, the lost salt gift of blood in this story is an act of love that gives life, and, as MacLeod says, “All of us are better when we’re loved” (272, 283). In contrast to the examples of dysfunction in families such as the O’Malleys, this story shows how an integrated personality who receives, as Werner and Smith say, “predominantly positive responses from their environment” can connect with his or her island and grow up to be more “stress-resistant or ‘resilient,’” important contributors to creating a strong island identity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Outsiders and Insiders in Wayne Johnston's *The Custodian of Paradise* and Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

The island's small . . . Every opinion counts.  
—from "I, Milton Acorn," Milton Acorn (92)

#### Mapping the Social Landscape

Just as children are affected by family structure and dynamics within the home, they are shaped by rules and boundaries within the community; and just as children learn the rules of the home, they learn how to negotiate their way through the rules of the community. The fact that communities are island communities has a significant impact on how the community works as the bounded nature of islands often creates conditions where social controls are intensified, exaggerated. In much of MacLeod's and Johnston's fiction, these social controls are illustrated by and through their characters. They can include the interpersonal relationships that are shaped by such seemingly petty forces as gossip and secrets, as well as institutional influences such as religion and socio-economic marginalization resulting in poverty. But at the heart of how people get along in the community is how they ultimately see themselves: as belonging (insiders), or as outcasts (outsiders). This, then, can become part of their identity.

Social controls can be characterized in different ways. They can include inquisitiveness or prying, where some people make it their business to know everyone else's business, with sometimes tragic results. For example, the father in *The Divine Ryans*, who eventually commits suicide because he can no longer live with his homosexuality, is one such victim. Says Draper Doyle, "You couldn't expect to wrestle with such a demon and at the same time keep him hidden from the world. Not for long, anyway" (185). They can include genealogy, where a name such as

Ryan in St. John's, Newfoundland, is synonymous with Catholic priests: "Because there were so many priests and nuns in the family, we were known throughout the city as the Divine Ryans"

(2). The name Lynn in Cape Breton is synonymous with fishing ("The Boat") or the MacKinnons or MacDonalds with mining ("The Closing Down of Summer," *No Great Mischief*). And just as people might not be able to get beyond a name, they might not be able to get past a reputation: in Fielding's case it is as a forger, an alcoholic, and an eccentric. Or perhaps a boy is expected to become a certain type of person or behave in a certain way because his father or brother did, such as the father in *The Divine Ryans*, whom the family needed to carry on the Ryan family line: "It had been presumed that 'bookish' as he was, he would take over the *Chronicle* one day, become what Sister Louise called 'the family's man of letters'" (130).

Another social control is status, where one is of the more privileged classes, such as Dr. Fielding and his daughter in *The Custodian of Paradise* who are of "the quality" (137) or, as Aunt Phil says to the mother in *The Divine Ryans*: "'Here, in this city, on this street, you belong to one of the better families. Anywhere else, you simply wouldn't belong'" (169). The opposite, of course, is someone like Joe Smallwood in *Custodian*, who, according to Dr. Fielding, is the son of "'Pure scruff. Scruff bred from scruff'" (113). Intermingling of the two classes is severely frowned upon, as Dr. Fielding admonishes Sheilagh when she tells him the father of her child is Smallwood: "'This must not get out. It mustn't. . . . My good name would be destroyed. All that remains of my reputation would be lost'" (112).

The controlling force of the Roman Catholic religion is strong in the St. John's portrayed in *The Divine Ryans*: "When Montreal was playing Toronto at the Forum, as they were tonight, it was not a hockey game, but a holy war, a crusade carried on nationwide TV, Rome's Canadiens versus Canterbury's Maple Leafs, 'the heathen Leafs against the Holy Habs,' as Uncle Reginald

put it” (78). This kind of rivalry between Protestants and Catholics is played out at many levels, such as that between Aunt Phil and Millie Barter, the matriarch of the Protestant Barter family who lives just down the street. They have never spoken with one another, yet after every televised hockey game between the Habs and the Leafs, “the family whose team had won would phone the family whose team had lost, not to speak to them, of course, but only to let their phone ring three times—three gloating cheers” (77). These examples of religious rivalry as described in Johnston are more humorous than serious when compared with real holy wars, but they contribute to the development of many of his characters, forming part of their identity as they define themselves in relationship to others. Just as islanders define themselves against the mainland “Other,” the Ryans are the Catholic “tribe” who band together to combat and define themselves against the Protestant “Other.”

Often a social control is poverty, which plays a key role in how a community works. How people create a livelihood on these islands is at the heart of these societies, but as island residents are prevented or estranged from their traditional ways of making a living, they find it increasingly difficult to survive—which can be exacerbated by the lack of viable alternatives or choices because of the island’s geographical boundedness. In many of MacLeod’s stories, the only alternative is to leave the island altogether, gutting communities of their young people. As eighteen-year-old James says, in “The Vastness of the Dark,” “For today I leave behind this grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town whose prisoner I have been all my life. And I have decided that almost any place must be better than this one with its worn-out mines and smoke-black houses. . .” (33). Yet it isn’t an easy leaving, as a miner says about the tradition of coal-mining that for James had been in the family since 1873: “Son of a bitch. . . It seems to bust your balls and it’s bound to break your heart” (58). It can upset traditional family structures and pit family

members against one another, as in MacLeod's stories "The Return," "The Boat," and "The Road to Rankin's Point," to name a few. As Frances Berces writes,

Hardship is faced not only by individuals but also by entire families and generations of people. It dominates [the short story collection] *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and becomes through historical scope and continuity a representative measure of what it means for the human spirit to exist. Maritime conditions become the human condition reduced to its essentials. (116)

Poverty in MacLeod, then, is a major determining force that shapes and molds his characters and their identity.

Poverty, too, can be caused by circumstances beyond people's control. As Creelman writes, "[MacLeod] consistently addresses questions of identity and examines the threatening power of external forces. . . . inevitable, natural conditions beyond the sphere of influence of the local community" (128–30). Often these forces are couched in terms of education or books. But education and modernization are not only MacLeod's domain; in Johnston's work, education has its detractors, too: "'More people have ruined their minds by getting an education,' Aunt Phil said, 'than have gone to hell, and that's saying something'" (164). The vehemence in her words is similar to that of the mother's in "The Boat," thus repeated here from Chapter Two: "'I would like to know how books help anyone to live a life'" (10). And, due to their vulnerability to outside forces, islands may be more affected by change more acutely than in other locales, making it seem more intense than in other places. Folklorists such as David Weale from Prince Edward Island in his book, *Them Times*, call this "the break, that early post-World War II period when the twentieth century seemed to hit the Island all at once" (1).

In order to combat the forces of poverty, some of MacLeod's islanders—men

especially—find themselves being forced to leave in order to support their families. Many of MacLeod’s characters continue to send home money and presents. For example, the brother Neil who sends home Christmas packages in “To Every Thing There is a Season” earns his living by working on the Great Lakes boats. The miners in “The Closing Down of Summer” work in mines all over the world, coming home only in the summertime to rest, turn their pale underground skins brown, impregnate their wives, and reacquaint themselves with their families. Their earnings go into a bank account which their families can access. These conditions are comparable to some South Pacific island economies, commonly referred to as MIRAB economies (an acronym of Migration, Remittances, and Bureaucracy) where migration and remittances help the family to survive. As is evidenced in MacLeod’s stories, the cost on both sides is great as families who remain try to cope with the absence of their fathers and brothers, and those who leave are wracked by homesickness and guilt for leaving.

Sometimes poverty is made worse by religion: Catholicism’s ban on birth control can lead to large families, where, as Kulyk Keefer says, “love yields not pleasure but children, and children, further entrapment in unceasing labour” (184). Supporting these families often leads to conditions of abject poverty as jobs disappear. Many of MacLeod’s families have six or seven children, and, when they have only one child, like the family in “The Return,” the topic becomes one of contention. The grandfather refers to the situation with bitter sarcasm borne of his son’s desertion: “. . . is this the only one you have after being married eleven years?’ ‘I thought perhaps that was different in Montreal too.’” (85). Fielding ponders why her relationship with Smallwood—one of thirteen children—is non-sexual: “Perhaps he sees desire as a cause of symptom or poverty and ignorance. A trait of the poor and ignorant. Sex as an indulgence of the weak-willed that destroys more lives than it creates. As repugnant as liquor and idleness” (267).

All of these social controls can be factors in determining the health of an island community. Whether a community suffers from insularity and dependent and defeatist attitudes, or is dynamic and resilient and pulls together in the face of adversity, depends on the attitudes of its people and the transference of those attitudes: geographic boundedness often begets emotional boundedness which often leads to social boundedness. The sometimes extreme nature of island living—tragic events or intense circumstances which can cause individuals and a community to behave in a certain way—underpins the social interactions within a community. And how individuals view themselves, and identify themselves—as outsiders or insiders in these island communities, influenced by these social controls—can determine their fate, and the fate of the island community, particularly if they transfer and project their own emotional state onto the community.

This chapter, then, looks at these social factors that shape island identity, focusing on Sheilagh Fielding in Johnston's *The Custodian of Paradise* and Alexander and the clan MacDonald in MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*.

### **Sheilagh Fielding as “Outsider” in *The Custodian of Paradise***

Wayne Johnston's *The Custodian of Paradise*, published in 2006, is the story of Sheilagh Fielding, Joey Smallwood's love interest in Johnston's 1998 novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Kate Pullinger, in her review of *Custodian*, calls it a “ghost novel” in relation to *Colony*, “a shadow novel. Like a Gothic double, the two books stand in almost complete opposition to one another” (D14). But while *Colony* is “large and all-embracing, vast and universal . . . . *Custodian*'s story takes place almost entirely inside Fielding's own head: psychological, internal, repeatedly returning to pick over old wounds.” Maureen Garvie writes, “If, as critics have

suggested, Fielding is like Newfoundland itself—huge, beautiful, with an unknown heart (and an alcohol problem)—the trope here extends to her ancestry, which is irregular and also larger than life” (36). The novel portrays Fielding as an extreme example of an outsider in her community of St. John’s, Newfoundland, and in her own home where she is the daughter of a “chest doctor” (130).

The condition for Fielding’s isolation is established when her mother mysteriously abandons them when Fielding is six, leaving Dr. Fielding “scandalized” (38) in the community. He rails to his daughter, ““What other man of quality in Newfoundland was abandoned by his wife? Even among the scruff, such things are almost unheard of. . . . Only a letter of goodbye. . . . Everything was left unsaid. Everything”” (137). To make matters worse, Dr. Fielding does not believe that Sheilagh is his daughter, and obsesses about it constantly. He mostly worries about what others think, which further contributes to his instability. As evidence that gossip is rampant in St. John’s, Dr. Fielding being cuckolded by his wife even finds its way into a child’s hopscotch song, which Sheilagh overhears:

Fielding’s father loved her mother,  
 But Fielding’s mother loved another.  
 The man who Fielding’s mother married  
 Was not the man whose child she carried.  
 . . .  
 Fielding’s father’s nine feet tall  
 Dr. Fielding’s far too small.  
 And even though he’s five foot eight  
 Dr. Breen came far too late. . . . (466–7)



Although the rhyme's origin is not known, its existence demonstrates the power of the small island rumour mill to go all the way from a rumour about "the quality" down to street level where children chant it while playing hopscotch. As Sheilagh says, "a rhyming rumour cannot be put to rest" (467). She knows that anonymity in a small island city is impossible.

As a result of his own self-absorption and inability to face what Sheilagh represents, Dr. Fielding leaves his daughter alone in the large house from a young age while he works late into the night—in effect abandoning her once more. She says,

After age nine, I had the house to myself most of the time. I was often in bed, asleep, by the time my father got home. . . . Every day after school, I sat in the front room, reading, brooding, pondering the after-school life of other girls my age, not so much waiting for my father to come home as wondering if this night and all the nights to follow he would not. It seemed possible. What one parent had done, the other might do. (82)

As an unreliable parent, Dr. Fielding has a tremendous impact on his daughter's sense of security. She fears that he will abandon her for good, just as her mother has done. The lack of love and support from her father, combined with Fielding seeing herself as "little more than a nuisance, an occasional intruder on his solitude, a presence that prevented his withdrawal from becoming absolute," (137) results in Fielding blaming herself for her mother's desertion. At the same time, she constantly baits her father, masochistically relying on her superior intelligence to try and hurt him as much as she can, knowing that he will respond with more hurtful words, thus giving her the punishment she feels she deserves for driving her mother away.

This sense of alienation from her father carries over into her relationships with practically everyone whom she knows. Possessed of an acerbic wit, she presents herself as being too clever

for her own good (an unacceptable way for a girl to behave in St. John's in the early part of the twentieth century) and has no hesitation about speaking her mind in public to her peers at school, her teachers, and the boys at Bishop Feild. She does not seem to care that she is seen as odd; rather, she takes a masochistic pride in it. Being overly tall for a girl (six feet at the age of twelve, and eventually six-foot-three), she is set apart from others, physically as well as intellectually:

It was commonly believed that I went out walking at night because of my limp, because I couldn't stand people gawking at my cumbersome boot. . . . What struck others most, I think, was the incongruousness of a woman of my size being hobbled by a limp, the conjunction of super-abundance and deficiency. I believe they thought my height and my limp were somehow connected, both proceeding from the same flaw in my nature. (34)

For someone who does not care how she is viewed by others, throughout her life she continually makes a point of detailing all the ways others criticize her for her deficiencies, which makes one wonder "if the lady doth protest too much." Like Smallwood, whom Fielding loves, she is conflicted, suffering from both an inferiority *and* superiority complex at the same time. She is wounded when someone lets her down, which contributes to her sense of inferiority and unworthiness of being loved, but she takes a perverse pride in being wounded, feeling superior that she is so marginalized. She will not express her emotions other than to rail against injustice in the world, because she is afraid that once people know how terrible she is—so terrible that her mother had to abandon her—they will no longer like her. Therefore she keeps everyone at a distance so they cannot hurt her. Throughout her life she exhibits behaviours that are outside the mainstream of society—being a reporter, for example, who writes all night and sleeps all day, living in a brothel, drinking bootlegged alcohol, living alone on the section line, isolating herself

on a small island—acts which only heighten her eccentricities and set her further apart from the society in which she lives. Pullinger writes, “This is Fielding, this is what she is like, unable to move beyond the terrible events of her own adolescence” (D14). Like Ted O’Malley she is caught in adolescence; but, unlike Ted, she does not wallow in self-doubt and existential questionings. She fights back against her perceived enemy—everyone around her—but she does not realize that what she is fighting against is really her inability to forgive herself for thinking she is the cause of her mother leaving. Fielding is an eccentric in the true sense of the word: as ex-centric, she has removed herself from the centre of her family and her community.

As a teenager she already knows that she does not wish to be part of what is expected of girls “who seemed unable to conceive of another sort of life than the one for which Spencer was preparing them, a life for which I was all too happy to admit I was unsuitable” (92). Nor does she wish to be raised like the boys at Bishop Feild: “disaffected, disdainful of my single-minded peers” who become the sort of men who “begrudgingly enlisted in a life that I disdained, an ineffectual crank who would become even more bitter as he aged, a figure of amusement to the captains of the world” (93). Ironically, as an adult she is quite like the boys she does not want to be. At school she cannot bring herself to talk with her teacher Miss Emilee, who is the one person who tries reaching out to her, saying, “I could not have told Miss Emilee that I had acted out of reckless desperation with no real end but notoriety in mind, notoriety from which I hoped that, somehow, something matching my notion of good would come” (93). This “notion of good” is only that she be loved. Deep down she feels that she is a good person who suffers great injustices from people whom she should be able to trust—people such as her mother, her father, Prowse, her mother again, Smallwood, her Provider—all of whom have let her down in some way. Fielding’s acerbic nature is a front, hiding the pain of abandonment that she feels.

It is paradoxical, then, knowing how affected she has been by her mother's abandoning her, that she should abandon her own babies when she leaves them with her mother and "Stepdoctor" Breen to raise in New York. Fearing more for her father's reputation than her own, she really does not have much choice in the matter, given the nature of her island society at that time. Perversely, this is yet another way of punishing herself for her own mother leaving her.

Because she feels that the island is partly responsible for her eccentricity, she returns to it and strikes back at it, becoming a journalist at age sixteen by writing a column called "Fielding the Forger" for one of St. John's independent newspapers. She is an excellent communicator in her columns, but, being emotionally bounded and unable to trust anyone, she cannot tell the truth about any of the injustices she has suffered. Instead she rails against the injustices around her, skewering the influential politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen whom she knows to be greedy and corrupt. But she also knows she is in an island city where everyone knows everyone else's business:

I knew that word of my strange investigation would quickly spread, word that I had gone there, asking questions about a mysterious and probably non-existent pair of oversized boots. My curiosity would be taken as conclusive proof that I had lost my mind. At the very least, it would enhance my reputation as a dipsomaniacal oddball. (397)

Mired in cynicism, she observes the island from the vantage point of an outsider, and takes pride in it. In a conversation with a member of the Temperance League, she is biting but self-aware, with an ability to laugh at herself:

Some say that I stoop to their level, others that I am high and mighty. Some say I live in the gutter, some that I look down on people from my ivory tower,

especially when I get on my high horse, which is when they would most like to cut me down to size or take me down a peg. I am, according to one rival columnist, a hoity-toity member of the hoi polloi. (393)

Even among the factions, each one claims that she belongs to the other, heightening her sense of being outcast. When Prowse tries to blackmail Fielding into printing a retraction of a column she writes about humiliating her father in the mock trial, he tells her, ““There is not a person of consequence, Fielding, who will speak in your defence”” (434). But even this does not seem to bother her. She retorts, ““What do you hope to accomplish, Prowse? It’s not as if I have a reputation to protect.”” (434). She relents only when he threatens to tell her father that she has been arrested and fined for prostitution: “Some version of it might be absorbed into the tumult, the swirling torment of my father’s mind. . . . By how much might his torment be multiplied if even a shadow of this latest calamity registered on his consciousness” (435). Fielding could not do that to her father and capitulates to Prowse’s demands, “walk[ing] away from them like a woman resuming her progress after some brief inconsequential interruption” (436). For the most part Fielding does not care what people think about her, but in the end she cares about the effect that she might have on her father. For all that she baits him into showing his disdain for her, when she reads her father’s last letter to her, she says, “How it wounded me that there should be no closing salutation” (440). She finally realizes that she really does love him, even after he cruelly throws the last punch: “*Do you know how others see you? Are you not able to see how you are commonly regarded? Your nature is as much an aberration as your stature. Your lameness seems intrinsic, the outer emblem of some inner deviance, an injury that was latent in your bones from birth*” (440).

Fielding’s second trip to New York is with Smallwood, where she still cannot move

beyond being an outsider. Because of the size of New York, one might expect that she could lose some of her outsider status by being able to blend in at last. Yet she joins Smallwood and their fellow Newfoundlanders at a boarding house dubbed “the Hotel Newfoundland,” named so because of the many Newfoundlanders who live there, marginalized from the rest of New York. There, too, outsider/insider attitudes prevail: “The purveyors [of bootlegged alcohol] at Hotel Newfoundland sell to no one else but Newfoundlanders” (248). She observes that even though she is well-known as Fielding the Forger who was blamed for forcing Smallwood out of his school, “[T]here is a kind of understanding here that the past is temporarily on hold, that this city and the peculiar kind of homesickness it inspires convey on everyone a sort of amnesty” (248–9). In their homesick plight, there is a solidarity that they would not have at home. Yet neither she nor Smallwood fits in there either, extending her outsider status to being outcast from the outcasts. “Smallwood’s fate, it seems, is to be regarded as a kind of mascot no matter where he goes” (250).

But, in the end, Fielding does not blend in in New York either:

But *all* men stare at me. Because of *my* height. All *people* do. Not even here can I be inconspicuous. Even here I am a spectacle, gawked at, one of the exotic sights of New York. . . . I try to play my part, to carry myself as if I belong here, so accustomed to being looked up at and pointed at that I no longer notice, try to look like I am flaunting my exoticism to shock the small-minded, provincial newcomers to New York. (249)

It is ironic that she should feel like she belongs because she *does* stand out. But Fielding has marginalized herself, bringing her small island demons with her to the urban experience, using her sharp tongue to alienate herself from Smallwood and the other Newfoundlanders. She leaves

Smallwood to fend for himself after a marriage proposal gone awry—botched because she feels “marriage would be a sham. . . . [Her] heart would not be wholly his unless [she] told him” (265) about her children, which she refuses to do for fear of Smallwood’s reaction: “He would have received the news with revulsion. Regarded me with disgust” (265).

She moves into a small room and sinks further into alcoholism and depression. She thinks her landlord sees her as “some harmless lunatic . . . another resident of Manhattan who, once entertainingly eccentric, is now demented” (267). She eventually works up the nerve to view her children from a distance, which leaves her feeling “altered forever” (275) and “deranged” (283). She says she “can’t remember the last time the world seemed fixed and solid, the last time I was certain of my lucidity”(279). Finally, she admits, “If I do not leave this city soon I never will. I can’t stand to live any longer in such close proximity to the children. It seems that nothing but leaving the continent, nothing but putting an ocean between me and them will do” (280). Knowing she must put an ocean between herself and her children suggests just how strongly Fielding feels about needing to find sanctuary on an island in order to get over the hurt of abandoning her children.

A few days later, she leaves for good. She says, “What a sight I am. A spectacle. A parody of disappointment and defeat,” and she overhears someone say that she “should be quarantined or put in steerage” (284). “Quarantined” again suggests a forced enislement. In fact she contracts tuberculosis, and is put directly in “the San” upon her return to St. John’s, where she spends two years in quarantine convalescing. The illness leaves her with a deformed leg and a cane that accentuates her eccentricity even further. She is able to sleep only by anesthetizing herself with alcohol.

Eventually she isolates herself, first on the rail line as a “section man” in “[a] community

six hundred miles long and fifty feet wide. Impossible to infiltrate” (320). There she is left alone: “Whatever you’re here for, their kind but intractable faces say, you’ll never belong, no matter what. You are, for reasons we cannot fathom, a visitor in our lives” (314). Finally she takes herself to the ultimate in setting oneself apart and heightening one’s withdrawal: an uninhabited island called Loreburn Island, off the south coast of Newfoundland. Pullinger describes the scene as “full of foreboding, like a cross between a Greek myth (a woman alone on an island, keening madly) and an episode of *Lost* (feral dogs and wild horses thundering around in the undergrowth” (D14). Fielding goes there to read and write, and, in the end, to lure her Provider to her. Fielding has experienced social isolation, family isolation, personal isolation, and now this physical isolation makes it complete.

But it is in that marginality that she is finally truly alone, at the centre of “*a place of my own choosing*,” (12) where even the buildings will leave her be:

All the houses faced the sea and, like the houses of Quinton, had their windows boarded up. Loreburn looked to be in a permanent state of mourning, each family withdrawn to endless solitude behind those boarded windows. The houses were like faces whose eyes and ears had been patched and whose mouths had been taped shut. (21)

In castaway literature it is common for castaways to create an imaginary “other” with whom they can have one-way conversations, in order not to feel so alone. In this case Fielding attributes human qualities to the houses, then just as quickly cuts them off by covering all physical features they might use to see, hear, or speak. On this castaway island (where she conveniently has everything she needs in order to survive) she has symbolically cut herself off from any communication outside herself, resulting in the most extreme isolation she can think of.



While Johnston's novel is a study in eccentric behaviour, it also follows the pattern he has created in several of his previous novels, what Wyile refers to as his heavy reliance "on the device of gradual disclosure of secrets" (1). This novel is driven by secrets being revealed through a series of letters: secrets withheld mostly by the one man who knows her entire story: her "Provider," who turns out to be her biological father. Early in the novel, Fielding refers to secrets in a letter to her unborn child: "So many secrets to be kept from you. Everyone else in this house will know the truth and be committed to protecting you from it. Wary of letting something slip in front of you. Of what they commit to paper. Mindful, at all times, of where you are in the house" (57). This could easily refer to Fielding herself.

In the end she gets as close to learning the cause of her mother's desertion as she will ever get. Her Provider tells her, "Every time she looked at you she thought of how you got your name and also of the child that she destroyed," (502) and thus learns that she was not responsible for her mother leaving. By the time the book concludes, Fielding has forgiven her Provider for what he has done to her, and is on her way to forgiving her mother, and, more importantly, herself. But she has lost so much in her lifetime—her son and daughter, her chance of being loved—that it seems unlikely she will ever recover. And unless she can get beyond all the hurt that has been done to her, she has also lost her chance at living her life as more than just an outsider. The extreme nature of her being outcast from society, which is exacerbated by living on an island, has left her nearly broken.

There is a prequel/postscript to *Custodian*, as Johnston's audiences will know from reading the companion volume to this novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. By the end of *Colony*, we learn that Fielding heals enough to open up and tell her complete story to Smallwood. She even gives up drinking—taking two years to do so—and travels to New York to

meet her daughter and granddaughter. Smallwood finally acknowledges that he had loved her at one point in his life, just as she still loves him now. In *Colony*, he says,

And I had loved her, I had at least once in my life been capable of that, able to escape my self long enough to love. Suddenly, the unacknowledged sorrows and blunders of my life surged up in me all at once. I thought I would be sick. I gasped, put my hand over my mouth until tears began collecting on my fingers. I took my hand away and looked at it as if I had just discovered that I was bleeding.

Fielding turned away from the window.

Thank you,” I said. She nodded, smiled, turned back to the window.

(550–1)

Just as Smallwood thanks Fielding, in so doing she thanks him, too, for helping her on her way to healing.

Fielding’s penultimate words come in *Colony*, in a journal entry dated March 17, 1989. In it she forgives Smallwood, writing, “*I consider myself hugged and kissed by you, Smallwood, and am thinking now of you bidding me good-night. You may, if it pleases you, do likewise with me*” (556). With these words she is finally permitting herself to be loved, which means that she has finally forgiven herself.

The last word in *Colony* is also hers, reinforcing the thesis that an island can imprint itself on its people. As Fielding recalls the night the island voted in favour of Confederation in 1949, she describes seeing the “victory train” going by from her roof out on the section line. She imagines the scenery that would be flying by the window, and writes in her newspaper column:

These things, finally, primarily, are Newfoundland.

From a mind divesting itself of images, those of the land would be the last to go.

We are a people on whose minds these images have been imprinted.

We are a people in whose bodies old sea-seeking rivers roar with blood. (562)

Fielding knows that her identity—along with that of her people—is so much a part of Newfoundland, and Newfoundland is so much a part of theirs, that even as they lose their memory in their old age, like Alzheimer’s patients, the first and deepest memories—the images of their island—will be the last to go.

### ***Gille beag ruadh* as “Insider” in *No Great Mischief***

While Wayne Johnston’s Fielding is an outcast from her family and her island community, with seemingly no chance of ever fitting in or belonging, Alistair MacLeod’s Alexander MacDonald, *gille beag ruadh* (“the little red-haired boy”) in *No Great Mischief*, is fully integrated into an island family and island tradition from which he can never escape. His membership in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is as obvious as his red hair, and it follows him wherever he goes, from his small island off the coast of Cape Breton, to his grandparents’ community, to Halifax where he attends university, to the mines of Northern Ontario, to his home outside Toronto, to his twin sister’s home in Calgary. It even follows his brother and sister to Scotland, where their great-great-great-grandfather, *Calum Ruadh*, had immigrated from Moidart in 1779. Belonging is in his blood; it is his Scottish Gaelic inheritance, inculcated by his grandmother from an early age, telling her family, “Always look after your own blood” (8). She tells him, ““There are a lot of things I don’t know, but there are some things I really believe in. I believe you should always look after your blood. If I did not believe that,’ she would say, ‘Where would you two be?’” (58).

In fact, Alexander MacDonald is so integrated into the clan that he is one of *three* first cousins of about the same age named Alexander MacDonald. They all have red hair, and the

other two Alexander MacDonalds both play important roles in Alexander's life. The narrator Alexander differentiates himself from the others by always referring to them as the "red-haired Alexander MacDonald," and referring to himself only through the Gaelic translation, *gille beag ruadh*. Indeed, on his first day of school he is mocked by his classmates because he knows himself only by this name, and *not* Alexander. Says Alexander's sister when they are grown, when Alexander suggests that the traits they share with their grandparents might be genetic:

"Oh yes, genetic. Sometimes I think of *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. All of those people with their black and red hair. Like you and me. All of them intertwined and intermarried for two hundred years here in Canada and who knows for how long many years before. In Moidart and Keppoch, in Glencoe and Glenfinnan and Glengarry." (234–5)

The red hair, then, which is frequently referred to throughout the novel, becomes symbolic of just how interconnected with his heritage the narrator is, or, as David Williams writes, "as if there could be a bloodline and a voiceline reaching back to Moidart in the Scottish Highlands, almost as if words, like organic cells, could replicate their own DNA" (55). Alexander's DNA has given him red hair that marks him automatically as part of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. This is in sharp contrast to Fielding, whose gene pool is suspect for most of the novel, and who struggles to make her family cohere.

Unlike Fielding, however, Alexander MacDonald comes to accept who he is. As the novel unfolds, we learn about all that has happened to him and his family. The incidents are indeed tragic and heartbreaking, yet Alexander never comes across as feeling sorry for himself; he never rails against what has happened to him as Fielding does. Perhaps this can be chalked up to an emotional boundedness, a stoicism where men of his generation do not speak of their

emotions. Yet Alexander has had good role models, in his paternal grandparents and his maternal grandfather. His upbringing is filled with love and talk and fun. His older brothers suffer from being orphaned more than he does, and Calum in particular is shown to live life to the extreme, being so emotionally bounded that his only way of relieving the pressure is to drink and brawl or drive 1,700 miles non-stop just to get home to Cape Breton to relieve the homesickness. Through conversations with his brother Calum and his sister Catherine, Alexander questions what has happened, but the questions are never angry. Rather, they are asked as a way of trying to understand, and later from a place of acceptance: he realizes he has been more “lucky” than not in the “lucky, unlucky children” (67) descriptor he and his sister have been given; and he is grateful for it. In the end, he knows that he is an insider and is happy to be one.

Just as Fielding’s life and circumstances are shaped by forces beyond her control, so, too, are Alexander MacDonald’s. Yet, unlike Fielding, he and his twin sister Catherine are quickly taken over by their paternal grandparents and raised from the age of three when their parents and seven-year-old brother disappear through the ice as they head back to the small island off Cape Breton Island where the father is the lighthouse-keeper. The small Cape Breton community reacts quickly. Even as the grandfather realizes the significance of the light no longer moving out on the ice, the phone rings. The neighbours are calling to tell him, “The light is not moving. The light is not moving” (49). As is the way of small island communities, where they know they have to work together and depend on one another to survive, friends and relatives rally instantly, following the family’s tracks out onto the ice. But they find only one light sitting beside the hole where the family went through. That Alexander and his sister should be so immediately integrated into the island community contrasts with Fielding’s situation where virtually no one in the community comes to her aid.

The three teenaged brothers, while assisted immeasurably by the relatives, are mostly left to their own devices. With the death of the parents, and the arrival of an experienced lighthouse keeper from the mainland community of Pictou to replace them, the brothers are forced to leave the island where they grew up. They take over the old family farm where they work extremely hard trying to support themselves. Says one of his brothers, “For some years there in the old house we really did do almost anything we wanted apart from the necessities needed for staying alive. Sometimes girls would come to visit us and they would say, ‘Isn’t this great to be in a house with no parents nosing around,’ but after a while, even they would begin to look at their watches and speak of deadlines and boundaries that spoke to them but not to us” (181–2). It is as if the brothers have been cast adrift outside time and boundaries in this new existence without their parents. But they survive by staying together, finding strength in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Eventually poverty and the lure of a livelihood draws the brothers away to the mines in northern Ontario—just as many of their predecessors have done. The grandmother tells Alexander,

“Then the men began to go away. At first to work in the woods during the winter. To mainland Nova Scotia, and then to New Brunswick, to the Miramichi, and then to the state of Maine. Some of them never came back. And then families. My sister and I were married to two brothers. I was her bridesmaid. They went to San Francisco and we never saw them again, although we wrote to one another for years. ‘Blood is thicker than water,’ we always said.” (268)

As circumstances force the men to leave, the grandmother describes them moving outward into the world as if in a concentric circle, with the island at the centre. But always their blood, their inheritance, and their island pull them back. Writes Claire Omhové,

The characters’ individual present is enfolded in the clan’s collective past—the

Highland Clearances which, at the end of the eighteenth century, forced them away from their home to Nova Scotia. Six generations later the ancestral culture that was transplanted into the New World is withering under the joint pressures of poverty and progress. The secret MacLeod's characters share, but will not admit, is constrained within a double bind, staying in Cape Breton being just as impossible as leaving it. The narrative then obsessively recounts the moment of returning, when the home place provisionally coincides with the characters' longing to dwell there again. (3)

Like other MacLeod characters, they never forget where they come from or lose their island identity.

Alexander and his sister remain behind, cared for in much more luxurious circumstances than their brothers. Like the young boy in MacLeod's story "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," they are raised by their grandparents in a healthy family environment, where they are not affected by poverty. The grandfather has a good job as maintenance man in the hospital, which the grandparents always called "the chance" because they never took their good fortune—a steady income in safe working conditions—for granted. In the home there is space enough for the twins to have their own rooms, and money to buy clothes and time for crocheting and knitting and quilting "elaborate doilies and afghans and bedspreads" (66) for the sister's room; there is open communication, humour, much appreciation of their heritage, and love.

In those early years my sister and I were given advantages which my grandparents had been unable to give their own children. . . . Grateful for "the chance" which had freed her from slapping her washing on the rocks and grateful for the gift of time which she had not had much of when she was raising her own children.

Throughout our formative years, my sister and I lived under the ambiguous circumstances of being the “lucky, unlucky” children and of regarding our grandparents as our parents because they were closest to us in that role, while still yearning for the drowned idealized people who had gone into the sea. (66–7)

This contrasts with Fielding’s household, where she is alone for much of the time, and where, she, too, yearns for her mother. The MacDonald grandparents have not hesitated to take their grandchildren into their home, knowing that they are “their blood.” Fielding’s father, on the other hand, constantly questions the blood connection to his daughter. His parentage becomes an obsession, to the point where he cannot give Fielding a nurturing family environment.

Much later Calum acknowledges how the grandparents’ role affected his life. He may have felt a twinge of jealousy that he and his brothers always had to take care of themselves, as his tone indicates when being asked if he wants a lawyer after he is arrested for accidentally killing Fern Picard. Calum responds, “‘I have been looking after myself since I was sixteen years old. I can handle this.’ The justice of the peace indicated that it was not a good idea” (259). But he acknowledges that the brothers could not have cared for two three-year-olds:

“After our parents died we could not have looked after our sister and you. We could hardly look after ourselves, and when we went back to the old house we could not have survived without the help of all those people who brought chains and saws and a boat and horses.” . . .

“And I know,” he continued, “that you don’t have to be here with us either. You could be in your white lab coat in Halifax. It’s just that when Alexander was killed we needed another man,” he paused momentarily. “Ah, *‘ille bhig ruaidh*,” he said, “I appreciate that you’re here.” (204)



Because of their grandparents, Alexander and his sister attend school, graduate, and go off to university—Catherine to Alberta and Alexander to Halifax—a luxury the older brothers were not given.

In Halifax Alexander studies diligently to become a dentist, and to win prizes and scholarships so he can afford to continue. He feels uncomfortable around his professor who invites him out drinking one evening, and soon realizes just how far apart their worlds are:

I had never met anyone quite like him before and was suspicious of what he might want, and fearful that I might make some mental or verbal error which might jeopardize our tenuous student-professor relationship. . . . It seemed that a chasm gradually widened between us because of our drinking progress. As if one of us were on the shore and the other on a departing boat bound towards the open sea.

(104–5)

Just as Fielding leaves the continent for her island of Newfoundland, Alexander feels like an islander sailing further and further away from his professor's mainland world. The professor is not from the Atlantic area and does not know much about Cape Breton or his student, nor in the end does he really care to. The professor asks if Alexander's parents are dentists because, he says, "Most people who go into this profession come from dental families" (105). Ironically, the only drilling Alexander's family has done is in mine shafts. And his first glimpse of dentistry was his brother trying to pull out his own infected tooth with a pair of plyers, and, when that failed, having his horse Christy extract it by tying fishing line around it and pulling.

The day Alexander graduates from university is a turning point in his life. Alexander's grandparents and aunt and uncle drive down to Halifax from Cape Breton to be there, but at almost the exact minute that the mortar board is being placed on his head, Alexander notes that

his cousin, the red-haired Alexander MacDonald, is literally losing his head in a mining accident. With only a look and a nod, Alexander abandons dentistry to take up the other red-haired Alexander's place when the company asks for "the same number of men" (130) to return. Even though Alexander does not have much in common with his brothers, he is immediately an insider. His aunt, the mother of the dead red-haired Alexander, makes a point of giving him a shirt she had bought her son before she knew he had been killed: "'Take this and *wear* it,' she said, passing me the shirt. 'Don't leave it in the box. Will you do that?' 'Yes,' I said, 'I'll do that'" (132). And he does. Without hesitation he gives up his dreams and takes up his role as a necessary part of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*.

Alexander fits in well with his brothers working in the mines for Renco north of Sudbury, speaking mostly Gaelic with them, and becoming known as one of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. "'Those are the Highlanders,' they would say, 'from Cape Breton. They stay mostly to themselves'" (137). They listen to Cape Breton fiddle music and sing Gaelic songs; speak "mostly of the past and of the distant landscape which was our home" (146); consort occasionally with the men from Ireland and the men from Newfoundland, who share their language and love of stories and their attachment to home. The *clann Chalum Ruaidh* seek the company of like-minded islanders, who know the intensity of island living, where the elements are often hostile and life becomes honed to the essentials when it comes down to survival. Their shared language, culture, history, and islandness give them a sense of cohesion.

Alexander knows that he is lucky that he does not have to take this job to earn a living, unlike so many others who are forced into it by the poverty of their island. In contrast to his cousin Alexander who needed the job, he feels guilty because he is the "lucky, unlucky" one raised in privilege by his grandparents while his cousin is killed:

I told myself that he had gone into the mine after high school because he was not academically inclined. But I knew also that he had done so, at least in part, to help the members of his family who had been haunted, through no fault of their own, by the echoes of a kind of regional, generational poverty which whispered and sighed with the insistence of the unseen wind. (172–3)

This kind of “generational poverty” that drives the MacDonald clan from Cape Breton is also evident in many of MacLeod’s short stories. It is symptomatic of a small island where there is limited choice open to its inhabitants who want only to make a living for their families, who, as Kulyk Keefer says, are “under the relentless pressure of poverty, all the forms of love—of place, of wife or husband, of parent or child—become entrapment by regret, betrayal, or sheer necessity” (182). MacLeod’s reference to “generational” is significant. For pre-industrial generations, people relied more on farming and fishing and small cottage industries. With industry came paid employment, which led to the need for cash. It was no longer enough to be self-sufficient—now islanders had to leave to find work. As the language in this passage suggests, the memory of their island home haunts and tugs at them.

As it is true for James in “The Vastness of the Dark” and Angus in “The Return,” this is also true for the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*’s whose ties to Cape Breton are strong and intense, their homesickness palpable:

In the lulls between shifts my brothers often spoke of the landscape of their youth and their later young manhood. Far away on the edge of the Canadian Shield they recreated images of seasons and time separate from them by great distances of physical and mental geography. They remembered with great clarity their early lives upon the island: the clouds of gulls rising from the cliffs and the colony of

seals at the islands' northern end. (173)

For islanders living away, their memories of the island are intense. They not only remember but they “recreate” images. The island holds a special place in their memories, sustaining them while they carry out their gruelling labour in the mines. Indeed, one summer, while Alexander is still living with his grandparents, the brothers “talked all one day and night about the island. In the end we couldn’t stand it any longer” (210–1) so they drove the 1,700 miles from the mining job in Timmins, Ontario, to Cape Breton so they could take a boat out to the island, and “drill their initials and their dates and Colin’s, too” (213) so that their identities would not be forgotten. This intensity of their homesickness is more than just nostalgia. Rather, it rules them to leave their mark on the island. They feel the urge to inscribe themselves on the landscape just as the landscape is inscribed on them. Even years later, in his boarding house in Toronto, Calum tells Alexander,

“I listen to the national weather forecast every morning to check on the Cape Breton weather. I did it even when I was in Kingston. Even when we were in the mine and the actual weather didn’t matter for our work, it was still an interest. I guess we were so close to it for so long, always thinking of tides and storms and weather for hay and the winds that might damage the boat or bring the mackerel or herring. And of course the shifting and changes of the ice,” he adds after a pause. . . . (186)

Like immigrants who seek out like communities within their adopted cities so they can feel closer to home, Calum is an immigrant in his own country, listening to the weather forecast from Cape Breton to make him feel like he is a part of it still.

Alexander’s life may have continued in this fashion—an intense existence of mining,

drinking, and brawling, caused mostly by a longing for Cape Breton and family, and only going home intermittently—but when a third red-haired Alexander MacDonald joins them from San Francisco to avoid the draft, the trajectory of Alexander’s life changes yet again. As a favour to their grandparents, the clan accepts him as part of their crew. But this third red-haired Alexander upsets the delicate balance of the mining crews, led by Fern Picard of the French-Canadians and Calum MacDonald of the Highlanders. When Calum accidentally kills Picard, everything changes. Calum goes to prison; Alexander goes back to school; the remaining brothers split up, one to work the mines in British Columbia and the other to make a new home for himself in Scotland, where he is recognized as a highland MacDonald; and the third red-haired Alexander MacDonald disappears:

We never saw Alexander MacDonald again. I realized later that he had been wearing my MacDonald tartan shirt. The one that the mother of the red-haired Alexander MacDonald had purchased for him on my graduation day, the day that he had been killed. The shirt had been purchased for one Alexander MacDonald who had never worn it. It had been worn by a second and had vanished on the back of a third. (261)

The now fractured clan is symbolized in the disappearance of the shirt that linked the three red-haired Alexanders. The continuity is broken. And just as the narrator in the boat is given a chance at pursuing his dreams through education when his father commits suicide so his son will pursue his education, Alexander goes back to dentistry school when Calum sacrifices his freedom and goes to jail for killing Picard.

Like many of MacLeod’s stories, the novel becomes a lament for the loss of family and tradition. Nicholson writes, “alongside the informing lyricism, there is also in MacLeod’s writing

an abiding note of loss and regret, with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of choric threnody” (197). Underpinning the story is Alexander MacDonald’s birthright: the family’s roots in Scotland, the battle of Culloden, and the battle on the Plains of Abraham where the Highlanders fought under General Wolfe, who had written about his troops, ““They are hardy, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country, and no great mischief if they fall ” (237). The fierce loyalty of the clan system is still evident in this century in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, whose leader Calum is fittingly named after the first Calum Ruadh. Creelman notes that the importance of the clan system in this novel “cannot be overestimated. . . . [I]ndividuals must anchor themselves in their immediate community in order to attain a sense of identity” (140). He adds, “If the identity of the clan is anchored, in part, in the concepts of memory and loyalty, then the clan also identifies itself through moments of opposition and its clear memory of instances of betrayal” (142). The novel is filled with examples of loyalty and betrayal, but it is the loyalty that Alexander feels to the clan that keeps him anchored in a modern world that is losing its sense of family and tradition.

The sister, too, experiences the strength of the family ties to *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. During a trip to Scotland she realizes the distinctiveness of her genes when a woman recognizes the distinctive black hair of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* and tells her, “But you are really from here. You have just been away for a while” (160). Her words “from here” are clear and emphatic, demonstrating her attachment to her own particular island of Moidart, from where Calum Ruaidh had originally sailed, as well as the strength of her clan ties as she assumes proprietorship over Catherine, telling her, “You are home now” (167). Catherine finds herself conversing with the woman in Gaelic, later telling Alexander, “It was just like it poured out of me, like some subterranean river that had been running deep within me and suddenly burst forth” (163). The

ties continue through the next generation as well, when her eleven-year-old son in Calgary is stopped by a beat-up car full of men on their way to BC because they recognize “the look.” They give him a fifty-dollar bill and he asks, “‘What’s this for?’ . . . ‘It is,’ said the man, ‘for the way you look. Tell your mother it is from *clann Chalum Ruaidh*’” (30). The influences on childhood identity can be traced a great distance through family inheritance. Like Smallwood’s leash to his island, the “subterranean river” of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is a leash to the past, holding fast its descendants and securing their island identity while offering them a guide line into the future.

As adults, Catherine and her brother continue to maintain their strong family ties, with Alexander visiting his sister frequently in Calgary. Their time is spent reminiscing about their growing-up years, trying to understand their past, and retelling the old stories and marvelling at how interconnected they are. Catherine tells him that she wishes she had a photograph of her parents, and laments the fact that she has only group photos of the *Clann Chalum Ruiadh*.

“I thought, with modern technology,” said my sister, “I could separate our parents from these large groups. . . . The photo studio tried, but it would not work. As the photographs became larger the individual features of their faces became more blurred. It was as if in coming closer they became more indistinct. After a while I stopped. I left them with their group. It seemed the only thing to do.” (240–1)

As Williams notes, “Here is graphic evidence of the claim that the individual has no distinct identity apart from the clan” (50). In trying to reclaim her parents, Catherine is unable to distinguish them from the rest of the relatives in the photograph, demonstrating once more the strength of the clan. These interconnections are also symbolized in the Celtic ring, the never-ending circle, described by Karl E. Jirgens as “a braid or knot that binds life and death, past and future,” (88) which the third red-haired Alexander MacDonald wears. The cousin tells

Alexander, “‘My grandfather gave me this ring.’ ‘I noticed it,’ I said, ‘the first day that you came’” (243). Given Alexander’s attachment to the clan, he could not help but notice such an obvious symbol of interconnectedness as the Celtic knot.

While the themes of *No Great Mischief* are deeply rooted in the family’s strong Gaelic heritage, and the novel is, as Christian Riegel calls it, a “lament for the (inevitable) loss of tradition in the face of modernization and change,” (4) the novel is not nostalgic or sentimental—as critics of his earlier short stories have suggested, and as are quoted here by Riegel:

MacLeod’s short stories are pervasively somber in that they depict a culture that is in a gradual loss or erosion of value. Colin Nicholson considers MacLeod to be “involved in a kind of historical elegizing, playing pibroch on his own behalf” (99). The “Scottish-Canadian genealogical explorations” (Gittings 95) that largely comprise MacLeod’s short stories, as both laments of a lost past and as fictional chronicles of that past, have the function of memorializing the personal—and familial—as well as social history of their ancestors. (1)

The novel is filled with realistic characters who are often caught between two worlds and suffering for it: physically (as in Calum’s case), emotionally, and psychologically. The storyline is authentically grounded in the particular, and the themes are universal—no doubt one of the reasons the novel has met with such acceptance and acclaim the world over: people could identify with it. While the story might be sad, the narrator is not sentimental, nor does he feel sorry for himself or expect us to. The novel is a realistic representation of a time and place and circumstances that are often beyond the characters’ control. The novel speaks clearly to issues of island identity, and the strength of history and inheritance in helping islanders stay strong in the



face of the encroaching sameness that threatens to overwhelm an island's distinctive culture and identity. Early in the novel, Alexander observes "[a] young woman wearing a black T-shirt walk[ing] towards me. The slogan on the front reads, 'Living in the past is not living up to our potential'" (60). As an answer to his critics, this statement is the author's lovely, ironic touch; MacLeod addresses the nostalgia trap head-on. It is only through accepting the strong familial bonds of history that Alexander finds his potential, and reaffirms his identity as being an integral part of "the past." He realizes, "All of us are better when we're loved" (272, 283)—including him.

Alexander continues to look after his own blood by going to visit his elderly grandmother in her nursing home. Although she does not recognize him and asks Alexander if he is a folklorist, he assures her that he is not, but listens patiently, and joins her in singing an old Gaelic song about his family: "The MacDonalds were always wont / to stand boldly in the face of hardship / eagerly putting opponents to rout / faithful, intrepid in adversity" (271). Her song emphasizes what being part of the MacDonald is about, knowing, as Creelman says, "that communal and traditional hierarchies help to steady and stabilize the individual" (145). When she insists that the *gille beag ruadh* is thousands of miles away, he says, "I can no longer bear it. 'Grandma, it's me. The *gille beag ruadh*.'" She replies, "'I would know him if I met him anywhere in this whole wide world. He will always have a piece of my heart.'" (272). Alexander may be uneasy about his place in the *Clann Chalum Ruidh*, fuelled by guilt that he has been so lucky, but he cannot bear being left out or forgotten. But, no matter what happens, he knows he will always have a piece of her heart, and through that he comes to know and accept who he is: the *gille beag ruadh*.

In the final analysis, Alexander has more agency than does Fielding. Even though he may

experience unease about being on “the inside,” he helps perpetuate his place by taking care of his own blood: his brother. As the novel opens, we learn that the wealthy orthodontist Alexander MacDonald makes regular visits to Calum, his ex-convict brother who lives in a boarding house in Toronto, buying him alcohol and making sure that Calum is as comfortable as he will allow himself to be. Alexander is “taking care of his blood,” as his grandmother had often exhorted them to do. When Calum knows he is dying, he calls Alexander to drive him back to Cape Breton. They risk their lives as they count the waves washing over the Canso Causeway, which is closed because of the storm, but Calum tells him, “After the third big wave there will be a lull and then we’ll go. The third time is the charm” (281).

The car springs forward. The red engine light is on, the engine is roaring, and the water comes in at the bottom of the doors. The windshield wipers are thick with ice and stop dead. He rolls down the window and sticks his head out into the gale to see where he is going on the invisible road. The car rocks with the force of the blows. The causeway is littered with pieces of pulpwood and dead fish. He weaves around the obstacles. The wheels touch the other side.

Grandpa used to say that when he was a young man he would get an erection as soon as his feet hit Cape Breton. That was in the time, he said, when men had buttons on the front of their trousers. We, his middle-aged grandchildren, do not manifest any such signs of hopeful enthusiasm. But we are nonetheless here. (281)

They make it across safely and Calum dies, finally at peace on the soil of his home island. The novel ends with Alexander saying good-bye to his dead brother with the oft-repeated line, “All of us are better when we’re loved” (272, 283).

Alexander, known within his island community as the *gille beag ruadh*, struggles for much of his life to find his own identity within the *Clann Chalum Ruiadh*. But in the end, when his grandmother threatens to take it away by not recognizing who he is, he cannot bear to lose it. He realizes that the strength of his island identity comes from generations of history that have had their beginnings in the Scottish islands of Moidart, represented by their appearance, their fierce loyalty to the clan, and the sometimes overwhelming pull that their island of Cape Breton has on them when they are away from it. Just as the blood of their ancestors runs through their veins, binding them to their Scottish inheritance, the spirit of the island is imprinted on their psyches, binding them to Cape Breton. Alexander, too, is at peace, knowing precisely who he is, safe within the *Clann Chalum Ruiadh* of Cape Breton Island.

## Conclusion

The novels and short stories of Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston show how these two islanders have been affected by their islandness, and how islandness has shaped their identity. Islandness and island identity are demonstrated in their characters: who they are, what they do, why they do it, and how they think and feel. The effects of island identity are played out in their narratives: where they are set, how they unfold, how the tensions are created, and how they are resolved. Islandness also colours their language: their word choices and imagery, their metaphors, and the ways in which they portray the environment. Underlying the writing of both authors is the ocean and how it shapes its island inhabitants by its boundedness—physically or geographically, in the ways that the ocean’s boundary defines a character; psychologically, in the ways that childhood and family affect an individual growing up on an island; and emotionally, in the ways that social influences affect feelings of belonging and exile. As Wayne Johnston writes in *Colony*, “Nothing so enisles you like the sea” (389).

Islandness also pervades these authors’ preoccupations and themes, which are often established as binary opposites. They include such themes as poverty and wealth, tradition and modernity, belonging and exile, vulnerability and resilience, leaving and staying, routes and roots, tradition and modernity, dependency and autonomy, belonging and exile, prison and paradise. Yet, through close readings of MacLeod’s and Johnston’s fiction, it becomes evident that these themes are interdependent, meshing together into a complex web that infuses islanders’ lives and helps form their identity. These concepts are complex, but as we explore them we see that the nuances and complexities are influenced by the parameters of islandness and island identity. As seen in the characters of Alexander MacLeod and Fielding, for example, the binary of belonging and exile carries with it a whole host of historical and societal factors that interact

with one another, such as the importance of clan to twentieth-century Cape Bretoners, since they are descendants of the clan system from the Scottish islands, where islanders are forced to work together in order to survive. At the same time, societal and economic factors that come from living on an impoverished island, where outside forces—such as a cash economy that has replaced a subsistence one—force many of these same Cape Bretoners into exile in order to support their families. In Fielding's case, the class system of St. John's plays a significant role in how she feels exiled from her father and society: she suffers from the gossip and petty politics of small island society, and, as a result, is not able to connect with others. The relationships are complex, and in teasing out the connections between them, we gain important insights into their effects on island identity.

MacLeod's and Johnston's island identity also comes from the landscapes that were imprinted on their psyches when they were children, as evidenced in close readings of their work, supplemented by biographical details about the authors. This identity is shaped by their strong attachment to their islands—MacLeod's Cape Breton Island and Johnston's Newfoundland—which is forged in childhood. MacLeod writes while looking across the Northumberland Strait to another island; his words from "The Road to Rankin's Point" set the scene: "*On a clear day you can see Prince Edward Island*, we would say. Not 'forever,' just Prince Edward Island" (157). In contrast to "forever," Prince Edward Island is concrete, defined, offering inspiration by its very real presence while at the same time serving as a metaphoric reminder of what MacLeod cannot actually see, that he is writing *on* an island. MacLeod draws his creativity from Cape Breton itself, his ancestral lineage, and his deep-rooted sense of belonging. Jane Urquhart writes about how MacLeod's stories are "in their portrayal of an ancestral past that continually affects the present and in their sense of deep yearning for forsaken

landscapes, as fresh and complex as the present moment. We Canadians are, after all, a nation composed of people longing for a variety of abandoned homelands and tribes that inhabited them. . . ” (37).

In contrast to MacLeod, Johnston grew up entirely in Newfoundland, and now lives in Toronto. Unlike MacLeod, he does the bulk of his writing while *not* there; indeed, the exiled Johnston feeds off his longing for Newfoundland, a homesickness rooted in a sense of displacement and yearning for the familiar and home. He draws inspiration from the memories of the places and people he knew while growing up. But “every last member of my family has left Newfoundland,” he tells Bruce Porter in an interview. “I no longer had to wonder what my family thought about things I wrote and things I did. . . . I felt a little too close to the people who might be mistaken as the people I write about. . . . I think maybe it’s a case of making a break with it. Now that doesn’t mean making a break with Newfoundland” (16). Like James Joyce who exiled himself from Ireland but who wrote about nowhere else, Johnston continues to write about Newfoundland. And even when the setting is not obviously Newfoundland, he says to Porter, it “doesn’t mean [that] Newfoundland isn’t there in other ways, ways that are common to living on an island, in an isolated place away from the centre” (17). Islandness, then, is very much in Johnston’s consciousness as he writes. Jeanette Lynes in her article, “Is Newfoundland Inside that T.V.?” goes so far as to say that the family in his novel *Human Amusements*, which, unlike his other novels, is set in Toronto, “represent[s] localized identity”; it “plays out completely” . . . Johnston’s fascination with islands—in this case, metaphorical ones—and with the power differential of regional difference and smallness pitted against the powerful homogenizing forces of corporate culture” (84). For Johnston, then, the power of the island is never far from his psyche, even when he is writing elsewhere *about* elsewhere, as in the case of *Human*

*Amusements*, where he is writing in Toronto *about* Toronto.

Although both authors claim that their narratives are not autobiographical, there is enough evidence in both their works to suggest that their personal experiences have informed their characters, narratives, and imagery. Their work is grounded in the particularity of everyday island experience, and from those experiences they are able to draw out the themes that resonate with readers around the world. MacLeod is preoccupied with such themes as poverty and wealth, choice and inevitability, tradition and modernity, staying and leaving, and the importance of inheritance. Because MacLeod's themes, and so many of his characters, seem to be preoccupied with their attachment to the past, MacLeod's work has been characterized by some as nostalgic. In his defence, Claire Omhové writes, "It would . . . be inaccurate to mistake the narrators' concern with the fractures of long ago for nostalgia. The commemorated past is quite uninhabitable and offers little, if any, refuge against the economic uncertainties of the present" (8). It is difficult to find anything nostalgic in the hardship of the past, or in the suffering of his characters which he paints with images of brutality. After reading for the camera the final passage of "The Boat" in the film *Reading Alistair MacLeod*, Lisa Moore says, "So there's no way to feel nostalgic about the loss of the culture . . . the tenderness and the brutality in this passage bring them together in such a powerful way."

Johnston's preoccupations include the story of Newfoundland losing its independence and the hold it has over its inhabitants, exile and loss, and how the ocean can give meaning to language and to life—or leave an islander feeling enisled. Stan Dragland speaks to this enislement when he calls the Brow "a pivot between two great physical realities of Newfoundland; the land and the sea, and between the city and its assertion of humankind, especially family, and the humankind-negating sea" (203). In all of Johnston's writing, then, the

ocean surrounds and informs his characters. Depending on their upbringing and circumstances, some of these figures are able to cope with feelings of enislement better than others. But one way or another, they are all defined by the encircling power of the ocean.

It is possible, then, to take MacLeod's and Johnston's work a step further, exploring what it and other island literature can offer the world. It is one thing to set oneself apart, making islandness exclusive in order to protect one's place in the world. It is quite another to live as part of a global society, but to do so with particularity—particular spaces, particular ethnicities. Pete Hay argues that boundedness is, indeed, a strong contributor to island identity:

[T]hose who stress the hard-edgedness of the shoreline also tend to emphasize the contribution such a heightened sense of physical containment makes to the construction of an island identity. The strong sense of island identity stemming from the sharpness of that wave-lined boundary is often said to consist in the community-defining bond of a shared sense of isolation that generates a “unique sense of difference to other populations.” Islophiles tend to extol this sense of insularity; to see it as a source of islander resilience and versatility, and a state of existence to be cherished. (22)

Because of their small size and interrelatedness, islands are ideal sites for living with openness to the world, with resilience, inclusivity, and fluidity. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues for an archipelagraphy when theorizing about island literature, writing, “[N]o island is an isolated isle and that a system of archipelagraphy—that is a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents—provides a more appropriate metaphor for reading island cultures” (23). Historically, too, islands have changed and will continue to do so: “In the mix of the old and the new, island identities shift—they are



endlessly remade, but enough remains constant for *the* island to persist” (24). Hay suggests—though wonders if it is not too simplistic a view—“the longer a community of people lives on an island, and the smaller the island, the stronger the sense of island identity, and of identification with the island” (25). Where MacLeod is concerned, it would appear that he finds that isolation in islands off islands contributes to an acute sense of identity, particularly in his story “Island.” Tiny islands off other islands are symbolic in Johnston, too, as most of *The Custodian of Paradise* is narrated from Loreburn Island, which Fielding deliberately sought out as the most isolated and deserted island she could possibly find. For her it was a place to go to attempt to define her identity and, as a consequence, to initiate the process of healing.

Hay demonstrates similar preoccupations to those who discuss the place of regional literature within literary theory. As Jeanette Lynes asks, “[is it] even possible to sustain a sense of place, a ‘regional’ identity, within a world of collapsing spatial boundaries[?]” (83). She goes on to say, “[R]egional identity is constantly threatened by forces emanating from a larger world beyond its borders. The regionalist text is situated on these borders, and it is the regionalist’s job to chronicle conflicts that shape a vital and evolving identity” (88). In comparison to an island, the regionalist space lacks the hard edge of an ocean boundary, but, in both places, the traditional idea of boundary is not holding up as strongly as it once did against powerful global forces—forces that continue to have an impact on identities of particularity. But it is in these liminal spaces where boundaries are found that exciting things happen, where permeability and resilience and flexibility can allow traditional values to hold fast, evolve, and thrive. There is value, then, in substituting the word “regional” for “island” in this passage.

There is also value in placing MacLeod and Johnston firmly in the literary canon of island writing. As evidenced in their literary preoccupations, their work addresses the “anxiety of

modernity,” contributing immeasurably to the growing body of literature that reflects western modern society. It addresses this anxiety by making clear the place that island identity holds in what is more commonly seen as an urban discourse. This contribution is especially valuable since the discourse on islands sharpens the debate between tradition and modernity. Because tradition often hangs on longer in islands, change and evolution are often more clearly defined as modernity can seem to come all at once. This, of course, echoes Darwin, where islands are seen as laboratories for change.

Where the literature of islands is concerned, identity becomes more than an aesthetic matter. Contemporary readers will continue to respond to narratives that show how the various forces of island geography, history, and childhood interact with one another to create an island identity. Those who are interested in island cultures can find useful lessons in the literature of islands and the writers who continue to explore their deep commitment to their “circumscribed geography of home.” But, more importantly, in writing from a strong island identity and from places that are distinctively set apart physically and psychologically, island authors offer both a particularity and a universality that show how this dynamic can evolve, aware as they are of the social, economic, and cultural forces that shape and change culture and identity. By writing about themselves as islanders, Alistair MacLeod and Wayne Johnston reclaim their island stories, and contribute to islanders’ own sense of belonging and identity as they meet and interact with the contemporary world.

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