

# A Family of Migrant Workers Region and the Rise of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Alistair MacLeod

Jody Mason

Volume 38, Number 1, 2013

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl38\\_1art08](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl38_1art08)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mason, J. (2013). A Family of Migrant Workers: Region and the Rise of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Alistair MacLeod. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 38(1), 151–169.

All rights reserved, ©2013

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# A Family of Migrant Workers: Region and the Rise of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Alistair MacLeod

JODY MASON

THE VALUES ACCORDED TO LABOUR in Canadian literary discourses have shifted remarkably since the early nineteenth century, when a literary culture in English was first nurtured by anglophone settlers. Oliver Goldsmith's frequently anthologized long poem "The Rising Village" (1825) presents the figure of the individual male labourer (in this case, a farmer) as one who performs his territorial claim via his improvement of the soil. By cultivating the land, this labourer is able to repulse the omnipresent threat of the "wandering Indian": "By patient firmness and industrious toil / He still retains possession of the soil" (lines 103-04). This essentially Lockean argument — that the individual ownership of goods and property is justified by the labour exerted to produce those goods — is frequently repeated in Canadian literary discourses (in some prairie novels of the modern period, for example) and often serves nation-making ends (when it is harnessed to Romantic nationalism in the Confederation period, for example). Of course, this argument depends on labour that is undertaken in a specific place. However, writers in Canada have long called attention to the fact that Canada is a place shaped by another kind of labour practice — labour that is mobile, that migrates, that does not stay in place. Contemporary novels such as Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Cecil Foster's *Slammin' Tar* (1998), Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999), and, more recently, Robert McGill's *Once We Had a Country* (2013) all direct readers to an alternative conception of labour's place in Canadian cultural history, urging us to see that the settler claims forged through labour (and the improvement of land) elide alternative histories of work and class relations. Importantly, these other histories, represented by contemporary fiction writers but also waiting to be recuperated in Canada's vast body of non-canonical (often

working-class and non-anglophone) literatures, unsettle settler claims, often introducing a gap between worker and nation.

Alistair MacLeod's fiction, which spans more than three decades (1968-2000) and includes two major short-story collections and one novel, describes the economic and political changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that resulted in the underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada and the consequent migration of many of its workers to other parts of North America. However, until Herb Wyile's admirable 2011 study of the effects of economic globalization and neoliberalism on Atlantic Canada, *Anne of Tim Hortons*, critics almost completely ignored the fact that MacLeod's writing explores the ascendance of neoliberal ideologies and the effects of a globalized economy on workers, who are often required to be innovative, entrepreneurial, and mobile. MacLeod's region, as Wyile points out, is under threat: the miners of MacLeod's story "The Closing Down of Summer" and his novel *No Great Mischief* are situated in a "globalized, capitalist economic context" (59) that acknowledges the shaping of regional space by global capital. This framing of MacLeod's representation of work has broad implications: one fascinating aspect of his *oeuvre* that remains unexamined is the way that he analogically links the disparate forms of labour mobility that have accompanied the rise and fall of industrial capitalism. In his 1999 novel *No Great Mischief*, MacLeod traces a genealogy that connects a very old Celtic labour diaspora to the contemporary labour diaspora created by guest worker programs, thus indicating the *longue durée* of contemporary global capitalism and its effects on both regional and national space. There is a long history here, as MacLeod tells us, a history of labour migration embedded in the slow birth of neoliberalism. *No Great Mischief* is apparently about clan, blood ties, race, and region, but its complex analogies create a kind of metaphorical family of migrant workers. This "family" evokes the contours of, but is not identical with, nation, suggesting the contemporary importance of class-based collectivities that exceed the nation.

Despite MacLeod's recognition, even in his short fiction, of the fact that the Maritime region is far from insular, that the fates of its workers are bound to other places, there is a strong impulse toward conservation in his *oeuvre*. MacLeod is far from the temporal setting of most of his work, a fact that is often metafictionally asserted in his fiction through the figure of the narrator who recalls a distant past. This narrative

device underpins many of the nostalgic impulses in MacLeod's short fiction, impulses that are often undermined by the simultaneous awareness that the past was always open to the future — that even ostensibly traditional labour practices have been bound for a very long time to an emerging neoliberal order.

Realism and regionalism are tightly coupled in critical assessments of MacLeod and of the late twentieth-century literature of Atlantic Canada generally. Representations of work on the land, or the lack thereof, are often read as evidence of a mimetic realism of a particularly regional variety. For instance, of David Adams Richards's first novel, *The Coming of Winter* (1974), Rick Hillis writes,

When Hemingway wrote about work, there was a bit more glamour involved: bull fighting, for example. Good gig if you can get it. Most writers do not write about work. Who can blame them? Work, unless you are fighting the bull, is not very dramatic. Readers, even of literary fiction, seek escape. But they also seek truth, and *The Coming of Winter* presents the naked truth. What strikes me most about this novel is that in style, description, and the dark chain of events, Richards is absolutely uncompromising in his truthful portrayal of ordinary people. (321)

In *Under Eastern Eyes*, Janice Kulyk Keefer expresses a similar sentiment in her assessment of MacLeod, Richards, and Alden Nowlan as realist writers: she identifies the “hard realism” of texts that convey the harsh conditions of working-class life in the Maritimes (167). As Laurie Ricou notes, realism and regionalism are assumed to go hand in hand because “the primary obligation to get details of setting right demands that the traditional emphases of realism govern regional writing: characters from the middle and lower class, ordinary day-to-day activities rather than extraordinary adventures, and an accessible sense of the motivation of characters” (“Region” 950). By this definition, Ricou notes, MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* is both a realist and a regional text (“Region” 950).

Yet recent appraisals of the legacies of regionalist criticism have challenged regionalist models that privilege work on the land while dehistoricizing and depoliticizing the history of work in the region of Atlantic Canada. Wyile's contribution is important here, and his voice is strengthened by the contributions of other critics, such as Lisa Chalykoff, who contends that regionalist critics like Edward McCourt

and Henry Kreisel, for example, subscribe to what she, following Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, calls the “illusion of opacity” (161). This illusion negates society’s role in processes of spatialization, such as regionalization, and consequently represents regional borders as “‘fixed,’ atemporal entities” and regional society as “an artificially harmonious collective by mitigating the inevitability of intraregional group conflict within these ‘naturally’ bounded regional spaces” (164).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the occupation MacLeod pays most attention to, mining, is linked to a history that demonstrates the international and, increasingly, transnational story of the movement of global capital. (Nevertheless, MacLeod’s work is often described as enshrining the kind of nostalgic, antimodern sentiment that Ian McKay explores in his book *The Quest of the Folk*.) While the nation and its economic practices remain central to the perpetuation of regional disparities that equalization payments have never been able to undo, Canada’s place within an international and, more recently, globalized economy also influences the creation of (often underprivileged) regions in the nation. The hesitant nature of the union between Atlantic and central Canada is frequently acknowledged, but it is worth emphasizing the supranational factors that made Confederation a compromise for the Atlantic region. The National Policy, for example, which must be considered in the context of Canada’s relation to its trading partners, was disastrous for the “wood, wind, and sail” economy of the Maritimes (Forbes 5-7).<sup>2</sup> If the protectionist tariffs of the National Policy aided the development of manufacturing and the coal and iron industries in the Maritimes, however, the elimination in 1907 of most of these tariffs made it difficult for the region to compete with U.S. products. Moreover, between 1917 and 1923, the federal government increased freight rates and Maritime producers were cut off from markets they had developed in Western Canada (Forbes 13). As Michael Earle contends, the history of the coal industry in the Maritimes is the story of “the rise and fall of provincial aspirations for industrial parity with central Canada” (57). Yet it is also clearly the story of imperial and neo-imperial relations and their impact on Canada’s uneven development. From the British monopoly of mining rights in the mid-nineteenth century to the formation of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) in 1920, which was a consortium of capitalists from Britain, Toronto, and Montreal, the history of coal mining in Nova Scotia is a history of foreign ownership and control (Earle 58-59, 64-65; Frank

461). Marxist historian Henry Veltmeyer understands the regional underdevelopment of the Maritimes that ensued from Confederation in terms of Marx's concept of an "industrial reserve army": "the expanded reproduction of capital at one pole (the centre) both requires and creates on the other (the periphery) conditions for a mass of 'free' labour held in reserve but available for purchase" (19). What examples like the National Policy or the coal industry reveal, however, is that the "centre" of Veltmeyer's formulation is not neatly located in central Canada — it extends into the complex networks of trade and imperial relations that were present in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada.

Both near and far from his narrators, MacLeod's Cape Breton is simultaneously "in all of our blood" and inescapably contaminated by elsewhere, as the tourists "equipped with tape recorders" in "The Boat" testify (*The Lost Salt Gift* 115). This complexity of region as one finds it in MacLeod's writing — its tentacled reach beyond itself — poses problems for realism, which conventionally exploits the proximity of the narrator to an identifiable, insular world. To get the setting "right" and to produce what Roland Barthes calls "*l'effet de réel*," the realist narrator must generally be situated close to the objects he represents; these objects must also exist in a knowable world that is external to him. Accordingly, MacLeod's narrators are almost invariably first-person, and the voice narrating is bound by blood to the community he represents.<sup>3</sup> While the conventions of realism demand a certain immediacy, the genre also allows, and indeed encourages, the simultaneous distance of retrospection. The contradiction of this doubled structure is precisely what grants realism its purported objectivity. Indeed, recall is a narrative technique that has been associated with the realist "serial expression of truth" (Ermarth 512). While MacLeod exploits this contradiction, his short stories are also generally cagey about the position of the narrator vis-à-vis the action; indeed, the narrators of his stories are often not only distant temporally from the action they recount, they are also commonly at a geographical distance from it — generally as a result of the economic and social change that MacLeod obsessively thematizes. Therefore, the informed internal narrator of MacLeod's short fiction frequently recalls the distant past for the reader, but his position in relation to those events is often ambiguous. For instance, the opening of "The Fall," the first story in MacLeod's first published collection, indicates that the tale about to be told is one that the narrator is

remembering: “‘We’ll just have to sell him,’ I remember my mother saying with finality” (*The Lost Salt Gift* 7). Yet four lines down, at the beginning of the next paragraph, the narrator shifts verbal tenses and continues the rest of the story in the present tense. Likewise, “The Road to Rankin’s Point” opens with the narrator’s deliberate obfuscation, “I am speaking now of a July in the early 1970s” (*The Lost Salt Gift* 126). The adverb “now” cancels out the clear temporal meaning of the object of the sentence, the “July in the early 1970s,” which alludes to a setting distant from the present. Like “The Fall,” the story proceeds in the present tense. The longed-for past and all the thickness of its detail are thus rendered present, but it is also firmly in the past where the narrator can access it “objectively” for the reader. In other words, MacLeod can insist on the “present” and proximate quality of the past, while cloaking the shift that enables this insistence. While the narrators of MacLeod’s short stories frequently document the social and economic change that has irrevocably altered life in Cape Breton, they seem to resist the determining power of that change by narrating the past, and its traditional social structures, in the present tense; however, this use of the present tense to describe a temporally and spatially distant past might also be understood as a narratological underpinning of MacLeod’s larger interest — the imbrication of the past/present and elsewhere/here. Yet if there is the suggestion in much of MacLeod’s short fiction that Cape Breton is ineluctably caught in history, it is his novel *No Great Mischief* that extends this idea. MacLeod’s short fiction often fuses past and present for filiative ends — to cement the bonds of clan weakened by migration. *No Great Mischief* confronts the impossibility of such a task.

Cynthia Sugars’s reading of *No Great Mischief* posits that this narrative’s “compulsion for genealogy is marked by an insistence on the predestined for fear that it might be gripped by the precarious” (135). Marked by contingency and chance, however, predestination is precisely this because, as Sugars demonstrates, discourses of filiation and proliferating origins only serve to emphasize the narrator’s estrangement from his own past. In other words, what appear to be attempts to legitimize and authenticate settler presence are actually failed attempts — attempts that continually fall short of their desire. This discontinuity between past and present in the novel may frustrate discourses of origin and clan, but it also introduces a new space in which to imagine what Janice Kulyk Keefer calls a “transnational and transcultural solidarity among

those who perform authentic, necessary and demanding labour" ("Loved Labour" 82). As Irene Guilford suggests, the novel urges us to consider not just the individual "rooted in personal history and locale, connected to the past," but also the fact that "migration and displacement are no longer occasional concerns, intermittent disruptions of history, but rather, constant and steady streams" (10). It is important to emphasize that the "solidarity" Kulyk Keefer refers to is one that is based on class (although MacLeod never uses the term); it is not narrowly ethnic or racial, unlike in MacLeod's short fiction, which often privileges "Old World clan social structures" (Hiscock 53). This replacement of what Edward Said calls "filiation" for "affiliation" distinguishes MacLeod's novel from his earlier short fiction, moving his work away from the realm of nostalgia with which his oeuvre is so often identified. The genealogy MacLeod traces in *No Great Mischief* is and is not familial; it is also the "genealogy" of a diverse group of workers who have long known the reality of labour migration. MacLeod deliberately avoids the language of class, opting instead for his habitual language of kinship, but in *No Great Mischief* this kinship is entirely metaphorical and suggests a new kind of collectivity.

As MacLeod's story "Island" insists, (male) labour migration has long shaped the culture of work and of family in the Maritimes: the women of this region are "used to seeing their men going to work for the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company and not expecting them back for years. Used to seeing their men going to the vast ocean-like tracts of prairie in places like Montana and Wyoming to work as sheepherders" (*Island* 375-76). In "The Vastness of the Dark," the narrator's grandfather and father have been cast adrift by a more recent history — the closing of the "big mines" — and this has meant the creation of a Celtic labour diaspora throughout the mining towns of North America — "Springhill, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Yellowknife, Britannia Beach, Butte, Virginia City, Escanaba, Sudbury, Whitehorse, Drumheller, Harlan, Ky., Elkins, W. Va., Fernie, B.C., Trinidad, Colo" (*The Lost Salt Gift* 38). MacLeod is gesturing to a particular history in these stories. The decline of the primary industries of fishing and lumbering after Confederation led to migration from the Maritime provinces, which in turn meant losses in representation in the House of Commons: between 1892 and 1924, the three eastern provinces lost sixteen seats (Forbes 12). The same fate later met the iron, coal, and manu-



facturing sectors. As these began to experience hard times in the 1920s, an estimated fifteen to twenty percent of the population left the region in order to seek work elsewhere (Forbes 18). In each decade between 1881 and 1931, one hundred thousand people left the Maritimes, and out-migration exceeded this during the Depression years and almost matched it in the years following the Second World War (Wynn 204).<sup>4</sup>

*No Great Mischief* and stories such as “Island,” “The Vastness of the Dark,” “The Golden Gift of Grey,” “The Return,” and “The Closing Down of Summer” acknowledge an ongoing history of economic migration and the resulting diaspora of Cape Bretoners with Gaelic ancestry that exists throughout North America. In the sense that MacLeod’s communities of miners are dispersed throughout the world (in places as far-flung as Africa in “The Closing Down of Summer” and *No Great Mischief*) and yet retain a strong attachment to Cape Breton (and beyond, to the Highlands of Scotland), they belong to a diaspora. As many contemporary theorists of diaspora acknowledge, it is important to challenge the communalist tendencies of traditional diaspora studies and to emphasize “inter-cultural and trans-cultural processes and forms,” while attending to the various social, political, and economic forces that disperse ethnic groups (Gilroy 207). Kanishka Goonewardena’s materialist critique of the potential relationship between postcolonial and diaspora studies extends Gilroy’s observations about culture, and, indeed, points out that the ethno-cultural focus of both fields tends to prevent fuller investigations of “political, economic, spatial, sociological, and (more broadly) historical factors,” as well as “the geopolitics of imperialism and colonialism” and their contemporary appearances as globalization (667). The specific term “labour diaspora” attempts to capture some of the specificity that Goonewardena advocates. Alan Anderson understands a “proletarian or labour diaspora” as one composed of migrants with “no economic resources other than their labour, few communication skills and limited organizational experience,” in contrast to “mobilized diasporas,” which comprise skilled workers who move easily across borders (25). While Anderson’s distinction can be useful, it is also true that the borders of these groups may overlap: the hard rock miners MacLeod represents, for example, sell their manual labour as their sole resource but are also often skilled workers, as in the case of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* of *No Great Mischief*, who are specialized drift and development miners. Analyzing the his-

tory and culture of any given labour diaspora not only requires careful distinctions based on labour practices, but also an attentiveness to the historical relationships among imperialism, colonialism, and globalization. It is this latter question, in particular, that interests MacLeod in *No Great Mischief*: from whence does this labour diaspora come, and to what contemporary phenomena of labour migration is it connected?

In *No Great Mischief*, MacLeod uses Cape Breton to stand in for the homeland that was lost when the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* was forced to migrate to North America in the eighteenth century as a result of conflict between British rulers and Highland clans. The two geographies are confounded throughout the novel because the narrator, a red-haired orthodontist named Alexander MacDonald, is in double exile — from the home of his ancestors and the home of his youth. Alexander now lives in southwestern Ontario, but, like all of MacLeod's narrators, Alexander is conscious of the economic and social change that has altered the fate of his family — a clan of hard-rock miners from Cape Breton. The longer form of the novel allows for a first-person narrator to ruminate upon his past and present experiences in a non-teleological narrative that weaves the multigenerational story of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* into landscapes as diverse as Scotland, Cape Breton, Windsor, Calgary, and Peru. Although family and the (primarily patriarchal, homosocial) bonds of clan constitute the centre of the novel's world (as they do in all of MacLeod's short fiction), the longer form of the narrative permits MacLeod to extend his interest beyond this nucleus to include other communities of male labourers.

The part of the narrative that focuses on the work of mining is set in the late 1960s, during the uranium boom in the area around Elliot Lake, Ontario, and, more exactly, during the summer following the April 1968 election of Pierre Trudeau. As Wyile observes, the skilled miners of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* in many ways "anticipate the dynamics of a more global, post-Fordist regime" (61). This is accurate: the miners led by the narrator's oldest brother, Calum, do indeed work for a "transnational corporation as part of an international workforce"; they do "travel all over the world, the company easing their passage across political and monetary boundaries"; and they are thus "more akin to the mobile, independent contractors of our current neo-liberal regime" (Wyile 61-62). The advent of economic globalization, which has so clearly altered the experience of labour almost everywhere in the

contemporary world, is frequently said to have begun in the 1970s, in the wake of the United States' abandonment of the fixed gold-U.S. dollar exchange standard that had prevailed since the 1944 Bretton Woods conference (Arrighi 299-300). In setting the Elliot Lake narrative during the summer of 1968, MacLeod thus chose a pivotal moment just prior to this global shift. *No Great Mischief* therefore seems to insist on the relation between the rise of globalization and what preceded it. As Giovanni Arrighi points out,

The scale, scope, and technical sophistication of the current financial expansions are, of course, much greater than those of previous financial expansions. But the greater scale, scope, and technical sophistication are nothing but the continuation of a well-established tendency of the *longue durée* of historical capitalism towards the formation of ever more powerful blocs of governmental and business organizations as leading agencies of capital accumulation on a world scale. (300)

Imre Szeman similarly draws attention to the *longue durée* and its centrality in many recent accounts of economic and cultural globalization, noting also the connections between “imperialist economic relationships” and “even more powerful and debilitating neoimperialist ones” — what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin call the “transmutation of imperialism into the supra-national operations of economics, communications, and culture” (112).

Just as the hard-rock miners of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* seem to anticipate particular conditions of work that intensify under neoliberal globalization, so *No Great Mischief* links the history of industrialization to the history of British imperialism and ultimately to the contemporary fact of globalization. When Alexander visits his twin sister Catherine in Calgary, she informs him that “Calgary gets its name from a place located on the Isle of Mull.” Alexander admits his ignorance of this fact, and she adds, “Well, there are none of the native people there any more, either” (232). She is referring to the Highland Clearances that came in the wake of her own family's emigration from Scotland, the modernizing “rural transformation” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries during which aristocratic British landlords shifted tenants off their estates in order to accommodate the raising of sheep and deer, to reap higher rents, and to reduce the costs of operating large estates in the remote region (Richards 3). As a result of this push, many peasant

Highlanders migrated to the east coast of Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia. The Isle of Mull that Catherine refers to “witnessed all manner of clearances” in this period (Richards 286). Forced to migrate as a result of the larger changes effected by the long British agricultural revolution and ultimately by industrialization, these Highlanders were caught in a process of change that displaced them against their will — a situation that Catherine compares to the later displacement of Blackfoot and other Aboriginal groups from the region around Calgary. This latter displacement is more clearly embedded in the territorial ambitions of British imperialism and, later, of the Canadian government, but Catherine’s analogy urges us to consider the historical connections between a modernizing Britain and a territorially expanding one. As we shall see, the novel later ties this analogy to the contemporary fates of both Gaelic and Aboriginal Canadians; it becomes increasingly clear that these groups share both a metaphorical genealogy and a similar fate in the globalized economy.

*No Great Mischief* is a novel that is obsessed with precedents and antecedents, with ancestors and descendents, but, as I have indicated, this “family” is not always a literal family bound by blood, despite the narrator’s grandparents’ oft-repeated insistence that “blood is thicker than water” (203). Instead, the novel’s metaphorical family is a complex assemblage linked up by the motif of the migrant labourer. The first two paragraphs of the novel introduce this motif and connect it explicitly to the metaphor of the family. Undertaking his weekly pilgrimage from Windsor to Toronto in order to see his eldest brother, Calum (now a white-haired alcoholic), Alexander observes both the “whole families” who are picking their own autumnal produce and the “imported workers” in “family groups” — Caribbeans, Mexican Mennonites, and French Canadians (1). While this opening section serves to contrast an authentic past of toil with an artificial present of luxury (a recurring theme in the novel), it also serves to link the concept of family to the figure of the migrant. Several pages later, another “family” is introduced: the shiftless, alcoholic men who inhabit the one-room, second-storey apartments along Queen Street West where Calum lives share a single bathroom “as if they were members of a large family” (5). The “families” of this first chapter seem disconnected — all pale imitations of the multigenerational black- and red-haired *clann Chalum Ruaidh* — but as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the biological bonds

of clan are less stable than the narrator (and his twin sister) would like them to be. Alexander, too, forms part of the makeshift family of males in the Queen Street apartments, for, in order to help the tremulous Calum imbibe the brandy that will calm his limbs, he must pour it into a “plastic bowl, the unbreakable kind that mothers buy for babies in high chairs” (10). Lacking a mother — she perished while migrating across the ice to her place of work when Alexander was a toddler and Calum a sixteen-year-old boy — the narrator must care for Calum in a kind of parody of maternal ritual. As subsequent chapters reveal, the MacDonalds of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* are able to trace their family origins back to a patriarch, their great-great-great grandfather Calum, who left Scotland for Cape Breton in 1779, yet the substitution of brother for mother that occurs in the first chapter adumbrates the fact that this clan has in fact been deeply altered by migration.

This adumbration is confirmed in later chapters when we discover, for example, that Alexander’s maternal grandfather lived his life as a “come by chance,” his illegitimate birth occasioned by the seasonal labour fluctuations that required male workers from Cape Breton to migrate annually to places such as Bangor, Maine (31). This “chance” is a source of great shame for the grandfather, keeping him always at a certain distance from the clan and reinforcing his wariness of idealizations of clan history. When he offers his account of the seventeenth-century Battle of Killiecrankie, for example, he emphasizes the losses of war and the damage done to families by the exigencies of war and migration. Although Alexander’s paternal grandpa recoils at this less celebratory version of Highland history, he unwittingly points out a great truth when he compares those soldiers who were buried far from home to the maternal grandfather’s “own father,” the migrant labourer who died and was buried in the woods of Maine, “perhaps without realizing he had set a life in motion” (91, 32). Migrancy is not new to the men of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*; long before the practice of seasonal labour migration resulted from the precarious Maritime resource economy, the political skirmishes in the wake of England’s Glorious Revolution obliged an earlier kind of labour migration.

The novel’s most unequivocal assertion that the bonds of clan are tested and ultimately damaged by migration appears at its climax, when the clan loses Calum as its leader due to the betrayal of another Alexander, this time a long-lost cousin from San Francisco whose grand-

parents migrated to the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, probably in order to secure employment. This betrayal is full of irony: the American Alexander is presented as an obligation that the narrator Alexander must assume because “blood is thicker than water” (203). In stealing the wallet of Fern Picard, the leader of the French-Canadian miners, Alexander (perhaps unwittingly) ignites a smoldering conflict between the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* and Picard’s men, whom Calum already suspects of being responsible for the death of yet another Alexander, the narrator’s father’s brother’s son. Angered by Fern Picard’s accusation that the Gaelic miners are “*des voleurs et des menteurs*,” Calum begins a brawl that concludes when he kills Picard with a blow from a tire iron, an act that earns Calum a life sentence in the Kingston Penitentiary. It is abundantly clear from the American Alexander’s betrayal, therefore, that biological family is not an exclusive source of refuge, comfort, and stability in a rapidly changing world; the family itself is, and has always been, caught in history.

The novel’s metaphor of family eventually comes to absorb many different male labourers, especially those who must migrate in order to earn their bread. As family accrues metaphorical qualities in the novel, the movement from “filiation” to “affiliation” that I referred to earlier occurs. Said’s terms “filiation” and “affiliation” are often used in diaspora studies to conceptualize the complex relationships a diasporic individual has to her place of birth or to the place conceived of as a homeland. Said uses filiation to describe the “natural” and “instinctual” ties an individual has to the people and places of her natal culture (24); affiliations, which eventually come to take the place of filiations, are those that are made with “institutions, associations, and communities whose social existence was not in fact guaranteed by biology” (17). For Said, the move from filiation to affiliation is the move from “instinctual” to “social” bonds, from family to world, from nature to culture (24). As Rosemary Marangoly-George points out, however, neither of these processes is natural: “A necessary alteration to propositions like Said’s would be to see ‘filiation’ as those bonds that are naturalized as ‘natural’ through the discourses that differentiate them from those bonds that are naturalized as ‘artificial’ or as ‘affiliations’” (17). If MacLeod’s short fiction often labours to naturalize such filiative bonds, *No Great Mischief* reveals their limits.

The “imported workers” who appear in the novel’s first chapter

subsequently reappear several times as the narrative circles back to the present and Alexander's trek from Windsor to Toronto. With each reiteration, it becomes clearer that the narrative is analogizing migrant labourers of different periods in Canadian history and gesturing to the transnational circuits that have long structured their working lives. These "imported workers" from Mexico and the Caribbean who lack access to "Canada's social assistance and health programs" (169) echo the French-Canadian, Gaelic, Portuguese, and Italian miners among whom Alexander works as a young man in the late 1960s insofar as these latter endure a similar crisis of citizenship as a result of their mobility: "Lester Pearson had long represented the riding of Algoma East, where we worked, but few of us ever voted because we did not meet the residency requirements" (245). Moving back and forth through time from the Scottish and French-Canadian migrant labourers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the imported Mexican and Caribbean, as well as French-Canadian, migrant labour of the late twentieth century, MacLeod conveys that Canada has long depended on a mobile labour force that it has often uneasily housed. In his dramatic adaptation of *No Great Mischief*, playwright David S. Young acknowledges the centrality of this analogy in MacLeod's novel. In the 2004 production at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, director Richard Rose interpreted the equation of old and new migrant labour diasporas quite literally: as the play opened, the migrant workers whom Alexander describes at the beginning of the novel were played by the same actors who performed the roles of the brothers and cousins of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Following MacLeod's prompts, Rose interpreted these figures as part of a single metaphorical family.

Indeed, labour migration comes to represent one of the defining features of the "family" in *No Great Mischief*, and this metaphorical family is developed throughout the narrative in tandem with its interrogation of filiative bonds. While there is great tension between the Gaelic and French-Canadian miners at Elliot Lake, and while Alexander points to the fact that in the dining hall at the camp the "small intense divisions" of language, ethnicity, and clan are repeated and perhaps even deepened (136), Alexander also points out the many bonds of culture and class that these workers share. This commonality becomes most visible about halfway through the novel, when Alexander recounts a day at the Elliot Lake mine when he and Calum find a man playing "McNab's

Hornpipe,” a “classic piece at the Cape Breton square dances,” in an abandoned car (151). The man turns out to be James MacDonald, a “James Bay Cree” whose “grandfather or his great-grandfather, he was not sure which, had been a man from Scotland who had plied the trade routes of the north when fur was king” (151). Armed with his fiddle, this Métis figure brings together the French-Canadian and the Gaelic miners, who play and dance the day away until “the titles from the different languages seemed to fade away almost entirely” and only the common tunes remain (154). The common tunes recall the mixed heritage of Cape Breton Island itself, a place inhabited by the Mi’kmaq, and later by French, Irish, and Scottish settlers.

Of course it is essential to observe that MacLeod places James MacDonald, the “James Bay Cree” at the centre of this scene. Significantly, James MacDonald becomes like a new kind of patriarch, replacing Calum before the ethnic rivalry that deposes him can. As he finishes a “tune which everyone knew by sound though not by name,” James comments, “it is like a man have a son and he is far away and does not give the son a name. . . . But the son is there anyways” (154). The “son” in this scene is surely the music that is intimately known but not named, but the father-son relation he alludes to also operates as a figure for his feeling of kinship with the men around him. This metaphor is extended when, in the wake of the death of Fern Picard, the narrator observes that he and Marcel Gingras, the one French-Canadian miner he has befriended, “had been inhabitants of different rooms in the same large house for a long, long time” (199). If origins are enigmatic in this novel, as Sugars suggests, MacLeod strongly urges his readers to contemplate James MacDonald as a kind of metaphorical father.

Those living in Canada share cultural traits, but they also share a history of displacement, of migrancy, and these are the commonalities that MacDonald’s presence makes clear. It is also crucial that James MacDonald is (partly) Aboriginal, and that the uncertain familial genealogy of the novel is made certain through him, if only metaphorically. His presence in the narrative also recalls the “Micmacs” who “were at home ‘in the land of the trees’” and greeted the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* when they landed on the shore of Cape Breton in 1779 and “help[ed] them through that first long winter,” acting almost like a surrogate family (26). Aboriginal cultures thus seem to be the settled and “homed” anchors of a less certain and more mobile settler presence;



however, in the penultimate chapter of *No Great Mischief*, the narrator weaves Aboriginal cultures into the novel's "family" of migrant labourers:

In the landscape around me, those who harvest the bounty of the earth are stilled for the day. Yet they are there in the near-darkness with their own hopes and dreams and disappointments. On the East Coast, the native peoples who move across the land, harvesting, are stilled also. Tomorrow they will cross back and forth across the borders, following the potato harvest and the blueberries, passing from New Brunswick into Maine and then back again. They are older than the borders and the boundaries between countries and they pay them little mind. (273)

Like the novel's other migrant labourers, the "native peoples" evoked in this passage are fully part of history, despite the fact that they are "older than the borders and the boundaries between countries." Like the warring Highlanders, the seasonal loggers of early twentieth-century Cape Breton, the migratory miners at Elliot Lake, and the migrant farm workers, they must move in order to survive, but this movement is not entirely in their control: it is largely determined by the needs of a globalized food industry and the precarious working conditions it creates. And this family is not identical with nation: for example, the narrative alludes several times to the similarities between Zulu migratory workers and the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. Sharing conditions of work in the mines of South Africa, these men also share a culture of music: "Our brothers said that after a while they could almost sing the songs, although they didn't know their meaning. It was as if it were one musical people reaching out to join another" (230). Moreover, the narrator's attention to the simultaneous legal power and cultural irrelevance of borders gestures to the fact that this metaphorical family is and is not contained by nation.<sup>5</sup>

The displacement of the Mi'kmaq people of Cape Breton Island by settlers from the Scottish Highlands (and elsewhere) is well known, but what MacLeod seems to be emphasizing in his affiliative "genealogy" is rather the fact that this "family" shares a common history of labour migration, of unsettlement. Subject for many centuries to the shifting demands of an increasingly global economy, the workers that have come to create this family are by no means identical with the borders of region or nation. Laura Moss argues that *No Great Mischief* is a novel that asserts "the continuity of 'settler' history in the portrait

of the many generations of the *Clann Calum Ruadh* in Cape Breton as migrants bonded by love and death, alcohol and pride, loyalty and pain" (6). In effacing the differences between Aboriginal and settler claims, *No Great Mischief* is certainly such an assertion. Yet the novel's migrant community is, as I have argued, larger than clan, region, and nation; it is a community that acknowledges the effects of a long history of economic globalization on migrant workers from very different corners of the world. Nonetheless, the affiliative bonds eked out in *No Great Mischief* are important and not entirely compromised ones, even though they depend on the language of kinship rather than class, and even though they obscure the *sui generis* status of Canadian Aboriginals: if the primary challenge of the contemporary moment is a global neoliberal order that treats "labour and the environment as mere commodities" (Harvey 70), the affiliative bonds (figured by MacLeod as a new kind of family) created through common working conditions are crucial to our collective survival.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chalykoff's argument is indebted to Frank Davey's earlier critique of regionalism. Davey contends that the metropolitan-hinterland understanding of history in Canada, which situates power in the major Canadian cities — and which has strongly influenced regionalist literary criticism — "disregards the complex intranational and international power relationships" that shape the nation (2).

<sup>2</sup> The National Policy is the name by which a federal system of protective tariffs introduced in late nineteenth-century Canada has come to be known. The policy was introduced by John A. Macdonald's Conservative government in a series of tariff changes in 1879 (Story 549-50).

<sup>3</sup> I deliberately use the male pronoun "he" because MacLeod's narrators are either male or they adopt the point of view of a male character. "Island" is an exception: the story is told from the point of view of a female character and the narrator's identity is not revealed. The exception to my comments about MacLeod's narrators being "bound by blood" to their communities is "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," which is told by an outsider to the community. Yet the story explores the narrator's desire to find an authentic community in the people of Cape Breton.

<sup>4</sup> MacLeod's family history is woven into this history of Depression-era out-migration. MacLeod was born in North Battleford, Saskatchewan because his parents migrated there from Cape Breton in search of work during the Depression. His family returned to Nova Scotia when he was a boy.

<sup>5</sup> Although Daniel Coleman's analysis of the "enterprising Scottish orphan" is otherwise compelling, I do not agree with his suggestion that MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* might be read as an example of the national allegory he traces (wherein the Scottish orphan becomes a figure for the nascent Canadian nation by abandoning clannish narrow-mindedness and

developing the Scottish values that emerged in the wake of that nation's Enlightenment) (note 10, 256). If one of the Scottish values that Coleman's orphans adopt is the notion that "class ascendancy" and "moral development" are demonstrated by "labour invested in private property" (113), the characters of *No Great Mischief* sell their labour in a market that requires many workers to be mobile and discourages their ownership and improvement of private property. Moreover, the affiliative bonds that I am suggesting are present in the novel exceed the national allegory as Coleman presents it.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Alan. "Diaspora and Exile: A Canadian and Comparative Perspective." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 18 (1998): 13-30. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso, 1994. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1984. Print.
- Chalykoff, Lisa. "Overcoming the Two Solitudes of Canadian Literary Regionalism." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23.1 (1998): 160-77. Print.
- Coleman, Daniel. *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. Print.
- Davey, Frank. "Toward the Ends of Regionalism." *Textual Studies in Canada* 9 (1997): 1-17. Print.
- Earle, Michael. "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia." *Industry and Society in Nova Scotia*. Ed. James E. Candow. Halifax: Fernwood, 2001. 57-79. Print.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth. "Realism, Perspective, and the Novel." *Critical Inquiry* 7.3 (1981): 499-520. Print.
- Forbes, Ernest R. *Aspects of Maritime Regionalism, 1867-1927*. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1983. Print.
- Frank, David. "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry, Cape Breton, 1922." *Canadian Working-Class History*. Ed. Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' P, 1992. 459-80. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. "Diaspora." *Paragraph* 17.3 (1994): 207-12. Print.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. "The Rising Village." *The Rising Village, with Other Poems*. Ed. Gerald Lynch. London: Canadian Poetry P, 1989. n. pag. *Canadian Poetry*. Web. 10 Aug. 2013.
- Goonewardena, Kanishka. "Postcolonialism and Diaspora: A Contribution to the Critique of Nationalist Ideology and Historiography in the Age of Globalization and Neoliberalism." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73.2 (2004): 657-90. Print.
- Guilford, Irene, ed. *Alistair MacLeod. Essays on His Works*. Toronto: Guernica, 2001. Print.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Hillis, Rick. Afterword. *The Coming of Winter*. 1974. By David Adams Richards. Toronto: McClelland, 1992. 319-23. Print.
- Hiscock, Andrew. "'This Inherited Life': Alistair MacLeod and the Ends of History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.2 (2000): 51-70. Print.
- Kulyk Keefer, Janice. "Loved Labour Lost. Alistair MacLeod's Elegaic Ethos." Guilford 72-83.
- . *Under Eastern Eyes*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987. Print.

- MacLeod, Alistair. *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*. 1986. Toronto: McClelland, 1992. Print.
- . *Island. The Collected Stories of Alistair MacLeod*. Toronto: McClelland, 2000. Print.
- . *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. Toronto: McClelland, 1976. Print.
- . *No Great Mischief*. Toronto: McClelland, 1999. Print.
- Marangoly George, Rosemary. *The Politics of Home*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- McKay, Ian. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994. Print.
- Moss, Laura. "Is Canada Postcolonial? Introducing the Question." *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. Ed. Moss. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003. 1-23. Print.
- No Great Mischief*. By David S. Young. Dir. Richard Rose. Tarragon Theatre, Toronto. 3 Nov.-12 Dec. 2004.
- Richards, Eric. *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords, and Rural Turmoil*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000. Print.
- Ricou, Laurie. "Region, Regionalism." *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*. Ed. W.H. New. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. 948-53. Print.
- Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. Print.
- Smith, Neil. *The Endgame of Globalization*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Story, Norah, ed. *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1967. Print.
- Sugars, Cynthia. "Repetition With a Difference: The Paradox of Origins in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008): 133-50. Print.
- Szeman, Imre. "Globalization." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Szeman. Johns Hopkins UP: n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2013.
- Veltmeyer, Henry. "The Capitalist Underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada." *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada*. Ed. Robert J. Brym and James R. Sacouman. Toronto: New Hogtown P, 1979. 17-35. Print.
- Wyle, Herb. *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2011. Print.
- Wynn, Graeme. "The Maritimes: The Geography of Fragmentation and Underdevelopment." *Heartland and Hinterland. A Geography of Canada*. Ed. L.D. McCann. 2nd ed. Scarborough: Prentice Hall, 1987. 174-245. Print.