THE PAST IN ALISTAIR MACLEOD’S CLEARANCES

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Abstract: In its linear flow through space, time has provided us with the means to measure the transience of our lives: the past, the present and the future. The elements of this triad share a very complex and difficult relationship: the past molds the present, which in its turn becomes the past only to influence the future. Alistair MacLeod’s “Clearances” bustles into this delicate matter of ‘time’ and tries to examine through the eyes and experiences of a nameless descendant of Scottish immigrants how one becomes who he is.

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
(T.S. Eliot)

The importance of place and memory in Alistair Macleod’s fiction has been the subject of much critical debate throughout the years. Among the most important contributions toward a better understanding of the relationship between memory, place and time in the Canadian writer’s fiction are Cristopher Gittings’ “Sounds in the Empty Space of History: the Highland Clearances in Neil Gunn’s Highland River and Alistair Macleod’s ‘The Road to Rankin’s Point’” (1992), Andrew Hiscock’s “This Inherited Life: Alistair Macleod and the Ends of History” (2000), and Laurie Kruk’s “Alistair Macleod: The World is Full of Exiles” (1995). Taking the aforementioned contributions as the starting point, this paper sets out to propose a new way in which the question of place and memory can be analyzed. Thus, the present inquiry focuses on the way in which the past, present and future bind together so as to allow us to explain our human lives, on how one becomes who he is and, last but not least, on how one lives in the present and moves forward into the future without losing intimacy with his country of origin and his past.

As Sue Haigh rightfully observed in a 2011 review of Island¹, the collection of short stories that “Clearances” is a part of, “MacLeod has perfected the art of the subtle flashback - the ‘I’, who is always a male, is often a child of the island returning to his roots, drawn back in adulthood by family illness or death” (Haigh). A small detail, such as the sight of a dog or a boat will trigger a series of powerful memories of past times, of past adventure, grief and loss. Macleod’s writing is marked by an obsession with identity and memory, and the ways in which they influence each other. These themes are often presented “as both static and continually evolving, and thus all past, present, or future events occur within the middle ground between longstanding tradition and fleeting impermanence” (Dils, 2017: 8).

In this respect, “Clearances” is no exception; whereas the short story brings to the fore a character in his old years of life, the reader is constantly pushed back into the old

¹ Published in 2000 as a regrouping of two earlier anthologies As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories (1986) and The Lost Salt Gift of Blood (1976).
man’s past in order to find out what actions of his past have set the stones for the man that he is now. As a result, the past becomes the central element of the story and, in what follows, we will deal with what we consider to be its most important aspects. Firstly, we have to discern between the two types of historical past: the collective one, shared by the group of people that suffered from the process of clearances, and the personal one, which absorbs the first one through heritage. Secondly, the old man’s present is constantly invaded by elements of the past which can be seen as connectors between the past and the present. Thirdly, there is also Alistair MacLeod’s sense of the past which is manifested in his writing about the past of others alike.

The historical past is a very important aspect in “Clearances” and can be seen as having two closely linked forms: the collective past and the personal past. The former is represented by the Highland Clearances which represented forced displacements of the population of the Scottish Highlands at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. The Clearances were an agrarian transformation process through which people were banished from communal lands by the landlords and forced to live in poverty in the coast or migrate. As a result, the direct effect of the clearances was mass emigration of the “highlanders” to the sea coast, the Scottish Lowlands, and the North American colonies. All the Scottish people that suffered from the brutality of their evictions and their need for emigration have in common this sad moment in their country’s history.

However, the protagonist of “Clearances” was not himself part of those forced displacements during the 18th and 19th century, his grandparents were, but by being brought up in the midst of a Scottish family much given to remembering the past and measuring the present in terms of it, the old collective past was embedded into his own personal past. Therefore, the collective past, although not belonging to the protagonist per se, has become part of his personal past through heritage and shaped his way of life and of looking at things. The interplay between these two types of historical past offers the old man his sense of, what Laurie Brinkow calls, “island identity” (2007: 5) and his sense of belonging to a very specific group/class of people.

The old widower’s sense of belonging to a particular minority, and more generally with all the groups of immigrants with a ‘double culture’ is realized through the discovery of his historical roots during the Second World War. This discovery is facilitated by others, more specifically, by the shepherd; thus, the protagonist’s trip abroad allows him to understand better who he is, what his origins are, and to create a bond manifested through an intense feeling of identity with the Scottish shepherd. Nevertheless, irrecoverable time glides away and identity becomes subject to change, although some forms of resistance are manifested in the text and they enable the old man to hang on to the past.

The old man’s incursion into the past by means of analepses is facilitated by things that exist in the present, things that act like mnemonic devices for the protagonist’s mind. The blanket is a very good example to support this argument; although it is a thing of the past it is also one of the present and its role is to merge the two dimensions of time to give the impression of stillness. The blanket was made at the beginning of his marriage and witnessed many intimate memories: the spouses’ passionate nights, their nights of tender sleep, but also sad memories such as the death of the old man’s wife. The blanket acts like a bridge from the present towards the past, and through its aid, the past is brought to life, becoming present once again.

The “bilingual” dog is another example of such a connector; although the dog does not look after the sheep anymore, as it had used to in the past, it is kept by the protagonist as a symbol of his identity in continuity; it holds a nuanced role within the power
dynamics of a human-animal relationship: “Both of us are overmatched here. … Neither of us was born for this” (“Clearances”, 2002: 430) – the narrator knows that he is not alone and will always find courage in his companion. There are also some symbols of the past such as the decayed salmon nets, or the idle boat, which have been affected by the passage of time, and appear in the present like haunting images of a period that can hardly be remembered:

He and the dog walked down to his little fishing shanty. He opened the door and took down the beautiful salmon nets from the pegs where they were hung. He went to rub the cork buoys between his fingers, but they crumbled at his touch. He came back out and closed the door. He looked at the land once cleared by his great-great-grandfather and at the field once cleared by himself. The spruce trees had been there and had been cleared and now they were back again. They went and came something like the tide, he thought, although he knew his analogy was incorrect. He looked towards the seal somewhere out there, miles beyond his vision, he imagined the point of Ardnamuchan and the land which lay beyond. He was at the edge of one continent, he thought, facing the invisible edge of another. He saw himself as a man in a historical documentary, probably, he thought, filmed in black and white. (“Clearances”, 2002).

Still, one of the most important elements that melts the past into the present in “Clearances” is language, a force laid down early and emotionally potent; a stamp on the heart, affecting the way one thinks and views the world, what one dreams and holds dear. Perhaps no one puts it better than Alistair MacLeod himself when he says that “the language you grow up with is the language of your heart.” (Evain, 2010). And indeed, the protagonist of the short story under discussion uses Gaelic, which is his mother tongue, on various occasions: in his colloquial discussions with his son, John, in his monologues with the dog or in moments of complete and utter darkness such as the time during the Second World War when he prayed in the tranches for his safety and survival. Language is the link that permits the old man to keep in touch with his real identity and reassert it anytime he wants to.

There is yet another standpoint from which the past can be interpreted in “Clearances”, namely that of the author himself, Alistair MacLeod. According to Brinklow, the Canadian writer was so profoundly influenced by his childhood experiences of growing up on an island that he bears a strong island identity which inspires and infuses his writing (2007: 6); in other words, Macleod’s childhood formed the templates of his creative vision (ibid). By employing fiction and writing about characters that share the same problems of identity that he might have, he manages to permeate the present with the past. “Skillfully interweaving past and present, recurring images and sensual detail, MacLeod creates a complex tapestry out of a seemingly simple and much-told family tale” (Urquhart, 2001: 37). In the space of a few short sentences the readers have joined the family, have entered the rooms of their house, and have gathered together to hear the remainder of the tale.

Although MacLeod chooses to explore the present challenges in Cape Breton with righteousness and pragmatism, he does so with a gratitude for the past and a willingness to explore its relationship to the present. It is because of this that MacLeod examines the bewilderment that he sees in the realms of memory and identity, describing the dissolving nature of loyalty as his characters transition into global modernity. This strategy, as Tom Dils points out, “requires a grounding in history that could come off as elegiac to the
casual reader, but it is in fact these lessons and values that MacLeod distills from past experiences that dictate his commentary on the challenges of the present and the tenuousness of the future” (2017: 10). There is the constant presence of the past, through history and story, myth and song, an influence so deep that it lasts for life. Likewise, as the old man in “Clearances” demonstrates, there is history, an inescapable, repetitive tide. Thus, MacLeod contributes to the definition of an identity, which is deeply rooted in the past, for the Scottish Canadians of Cape Breton through his writing.

MacLeod’s “Clearances” is resonant with the lamentations of exiles, and strong within these lamentations is the desire to preserve that which was, and even that which is, against the heartbreaking ravages of time; to preserve things from the past, not necessarily with factual accuracy, but rather with something that one can only call emotional truth. In the end, it becomes obvious that “Clearances” is a short story about the power of memories. Like the author himself put it: “Memories, like scars that you have on your physical self, you look at them later and you say ‘Oh, yeah, I remember how this came about and I remember what led to this.’” It is through memory and place that Alistair Macleod is able to explore the different positionalities that conform our identity. By writing about himself, Macleod reclaims his identity and contributes to the other Scottish descendants’ own sense of belonging and identity as they meet and face the contemporary world.

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