

# REVIEW ARTICLE

---

TONY TREMBLAY

## “Even More Symmetry Here Than I Imagined”: A Critical Reading of Recent Maritime Fictions

*No Great Mischief.* By Alistair MacLeod. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999. \$32.95.

*Baltimore's Mansion: A Memoir.* By Wayne Johnston. Toronto: Random House, 1999. \$32.95.

*Last Stand.* By Wayne Curtis. Halifax: Nimbus, 1999. \$16.95 (paper).

I know, before he begins to speak, that he is going to tell me. Everything favours it. If he does not tell me now he never will. I am leaving. He knows I plan to be a writer. He knows, or hopes, that someday I will write about him. He cannot get the story straight in his mind and believes that when I tell it he will understand it better. (Johnston, 196)

MARITIME LITERATURE IS ENJOYING something of a renaissance lately, one that has the potential to rival that of Buckler, Bruce, MacLennan, and Raddall. David Adams Richards and Wayne Johnston, the now “old guard,” keep publishing to wider and wider acclaim, with Richards credited for influencing an ever-growing number of young Maritime writers. Among those, Lynn Coady, Wayne and Herb Curtis, Ken Harvey, Jean McNeil, and Lynn Davies,

to name just a few, are gaining national recognition. Together with the second-generation Maritime Studies Programs, now starting to emerge after the retirements or reassignments of Maritime Studies pioneers such as Fred Cogswell, Gwen Davies, and the *Atlantic Provinces Book Review* folk, a confluence of creative energies and achievements are signalling that Maritime literature is again re-energizing, again readying to come of age. For readers of Maritime literature—and for those who believe that most of the best literature in this country has come from the east—it is an exciting time.

In the wake of this re-emergence, however, readers of Maritime literature are forced to address an anomaly, a note too loud and out of key. It is what might be called ‘the Alistair MacLeod phenomenon,’ and we ignore it, I suggest, at our peril. What are we to make, then, of all the hype surrounding MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief*? Is the novel, as Ken Harvey and *The Globe and Mail* keep insisting, “The book of the year—and of this decade ... a once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece”? Is MacLeod really “the greatest living Canadian writer”?<sup>1</sup> Is he even the greatest living Maritime writer? Or is he a Maritime writer at all—is he more or less Maritime, say, than Ann-Marie MacDonald? And what does MacLeod himself think of all the publishing house publicity and media hype, knowing as he must the lonely struggles of many worthy artists, the vast majority of whom will never enjoy the Norman Rockwell-type exuberance that has greeted his first novel? And what, finally, is the critic to make of all of this? Worse still, the Maritime critic, delighted with the attention given to a native son, but suspicious of the motives of that attention, knowing from experience the standard disconnect between the politics of exuberance and the quality of the work of art? Which is not to say, or to imply, that MacLeod’s book is unworthy, but that the managed marketing of MacLeod puts us all, critics and artists (and perhaps even the author himself), in a very awkward position, one that forces us to think about motive and affiliation even before the work of art can be considered. Put simply, the frenzy surrounding MacLeod’s book is out of step with almost everything we have experienced before.

While I would love to address the managed coercion of this hype—a hype which signals something unhealthy, even deceitful, about the publishing industry in Canada today, not to mention the

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, 15 April 2000, D5.

measures some will take to compensate for our growing cultural insecurity and insignificance—I will restrict myself in this article to a consideration of literature, for when the dust settles from these publishing house sweepstakes, it will be the books we are left with, not the publicity. As corollary, and to counter what might be perceived as the moral high ground I am taking here, it may be helpful to consider the reception of Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, which went virtually unnoticed, and certainly unheralded, in Canada in the early 1950s. This classic of Maritime/Canadian literature would have been lost to us, and we diminished, if not for one thing: its extraordinary quality as a work of art. The adoration by its various magi would come *after* it cemented its own and lasting claim to the realm of permanence, not before.

As antidote, then, and, I'll admit, something of corrective, this article will consider three recent Maritime novels, all three worthy of close attention, and none more deserving than the others of the kind of market-driven frenzy that seems regularly to be passing for literary criticism in this country lately. The first two, MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999) and Wayne Johnston's *Baltimore's Mansion* (1999), are written by Easterners "from away" (both authors live in southern Ontario), while the third, Wayne Curtis's *Last Stand* (1999), is a Maritime novel written in New Brunswick by a native, one born on the river he writes about. Why this should matter at all is a question none of the three authors before me would ask, for each of their novels concerns itself directly with the ponderous negotiations memory makes with place of birth and place of residence. After a brief examination of each novel, I will consider the three comparatively, extracting those points of convergence that will lead us to some "symmetry" in the Maritime condition.

The stories of the provenance of Alistair MacLeod's first novel are soon-to-be legendary, if not currently well known: the handwritten manuscript carried for ten years in the trunk of his car; the summer trips to Cape Breton to shape its form and broaden its canvas, coax it along by little more than twenty pages a year in a rustic cabin without electricity or telephone; the coercion, then harassment, then hijacking by his publisher in a Toronto train station; and finally McClelland and Stewart's self-admitted bungling of its release date, disqualifying the novel for Giller Prize and Gover-

nor General's Award consideration in the year of its publication. The textual history would make a fascinating book in itself, one which MacLeod may some day write. Beneath the long gestation, hurried delivery, and splashy launch, however, *No Great Mischief* pulsates with characteristic MacLeod rhythms and movements, as readers of his short stories will discover. On the broader canvas, MacLeod continues to record the torments of history, the price of loyalty, and the ambivalent attachments to home, family, language, and region. If ever there were a witness to the absurdity of human choice, of being simultaneously damned and haunted by options that are rigged either way, then MacLeod would be that witness. One need only read "In the Fall" or "The Boat" to understand the impossibility that we as humans, and as rural Maritimers, are sentenced to. Dow's old Calvinist *damned if you do and damned if you don't* seems an anemic gloss to what careful readers discover in MacLeod as a deeply unsettling exploration of the double-sided natures of joy and sorrow. Like his stories, then, his first novel concerns itself with the morbid business of living, which, imagery aside, demands of his work serious critical treatment.

At the surface of *No Great Mischief* are two children of the Cape Breton diaspora, Alexander and his twin sister Catherine, both from the clan Donald, known in Gaelic as the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, or Red Malcolm's Family. Both trace their ancestry to a fifty-five-year-old Calum MacDonald who left Moidart, Scotland in 1779 with a sick wife, who died in transit to the New World, twelve kids, and a loyal dog that would have swum the Atlantic in the wake of their ship rather than be left behind. Brother and sister are doubly exiled by the death of their parents, who crash through the spring ice on their way to the lighthouse they tend. Brought up by doting paternal grandparents, the twins enjoy a life unknown to their three older brothers, who, orphaned as well, live independently as crude young bachelors on their dead parents' farm. As the novel opens, Alexander, now a wealthy orthodontist from southern Ontario, is driving into Toronto to visit his alcoholic older brother in a skid row boarding house. If the time-layering seems complex, it is because MacLeod intends it to be, for his story is essentially about how the historical and genealogical pasts insist themselves on the present. The grown and successful Alexander, then, must constantly navigate the cumbersome atemporality of a 210-year-old ancestor, an upbringing of relative ease, and an upper middle class existence that betrays the hardships of his older brothers. The

time-shifting of the novel is the adult Alexander's attempt not only to make sense of his familial past, but to reconcile his material comforts with his moral unease, knowing that his advantage has come from the disadvantage of others in his family—and knowing, as well, the willingness of that sacrifice to enable his escape. The nuanced histories that intersect Alexander's quest for atonement—Robert the Bruce's injunction to the MacDonalds at Bannockburn in 1314, the Glencoe massacre of 1692, General Wolfe's use of the Scots as cannon fodder in the 1759 siege of Quebec, the extraordinary stories of animals and people too determined and too loyal for their own good, and the hazards of shaft mining on the Canadian Shield and beyond—serve as preface to the ambivalent present of Alexander, who is rich but poor in exactly those things that his oldest brother Calum is poor but rich in. In short, Alexander MacDonald is a long way from home, finding it increasingly difficult, but necessary, to separate memory from story in a world that mocks both: "A young woman wearing a black T-shirt walks towards me. The slogan on the front reads, 'Living in the past is not living up to our potential'" (60).

The incursion of a superficial modernity—one that seeks the quick fix of sentimentality for the pain of genuine knowing—is mostly absent from Wayne Johnston's *Baltimore's Mansion*, for Johnston dwells less on the sorrows of exile than on recreating for us the living presence of a pre-1949 "independent" Newfoundland. Johnston's primary protagonist, then, is the beloved Avalon Peninsula, the character and lore of which are passed down through three generations of Johnston men, each in his own way as sovereigntist as the last in his attachment to place. And even though the independent nation of Newfoundland was more a reality for the author's father and grandfather—"The land ... is more important than the country .... No one can make off with the land the way they made off with the country in 1949'" (227)—it is no less authentic, as story, for the author: "And for someone, who, like me, was born after 1949, the very existence of the country known as Newfoundland was just a story .... The country of no country is a story almost as enduring as the land" (228).

Whether land or story, the spirit of place survives in Johnston's telling, for he adopts the care of the living witness in recording the minutiae and subtleties of pre-Confederation Newfoundland. There are the stories of his grandfather's forge, of crystalline water, and of a two-day trek by father and son to replace a shattered anvil; there

are the tales of his father's mornings on the water, of the fish merchant's store, of Newfoundland outports, and of weather, cod, and ill-fated ships; and there are the author's own remembered stories of the patriots' last ride on the rails, of mummers, of capelin runs, and of abandoned villages, their former inhabitants resettled down the coast. But the stories Johnston most enjoys telling in this book are those of the Confederates versus the Nationalists, Joey's Newfoundland versus that of Peter Cashin, the Avalon Parnell. The Johnston family loyalty to Major Cashin, the hopes placed in referendum, the conspiracies and double-dealings of local politicians, and the lasting disappointment with the outcome (captured in the text of the family "catechisms"), all bring us into the interior of the mythic landscape the author receives as sacred trust. As such, the book is one of secrets and inheritances, those passed down from father to son: "His father didn't just learn to be a blacksmith from *his* father. He inherited, had drilled into him, a certain style of blacksmithing; he mimicked his father's choice and way of wielding tools, saw, by watching him, what the period of a hammer stroke should be, how long a certain kind of metal should be heated" (30–31). Grandson is every bit the smith his grandfather was, and every bit the patriot of his father.

To MacLeod's mining and Johnston's smithing, Wayne Curtis adds another useful metaphor for inheritance in *Last Stand*: fishing. Mind you, Curtis's book is no fish story. Rather, it is a reverse biblical allegory of Adam's return to his long-abandoned garden. Called by "whisper[s] in the trees," two hundred years of history, and voices he "never knew but ... could always hear" (1–2), Adam McBride returns to his childhood home to make sense of his own life and the lives of those who preceded him. He is met there by the powerful mythic presences of his familial past: by his great-great-grandfather, John, who carries the politics of the Old World onto Miramichi soil, fighting an Irishman over a slight on the beach; by his grandfather Tom, a brutal man, who kills a moose with an axe, cuts sixty-five acres of hay with a scythe, and breaks his young family physically from the demands of work; and by his father David whose rebellion against his own father causes a lifetime of insecurity and regret. Adam's task in the novel is to make sense of the textured inheritances of these forefathers and of the circumstances of their lives, including secrets, violence, deprivation, tuberculosis, fire, infidelity, and poaching. Against the insistence of these ghosts are the demands of Adam's present: a recent divorce,

a new relationship, an alcoholic brother, a crazy friend, a confused aunt. And against them all, the McBride river flows “like a wise old mother waiting for her children to mature and be hers again” (121). Like an expert fisherman, Adam must work the surface of his pool delicately, raising the mythic salmon from the deep water of his river.

For readers unfamiliar with Curtis’s work, *Last Stand* is a good book to start with, as it both powerfully and problematically distils the conditions of exile, return, and purposeful remembering, those conditions still central to the Maritime experience. Like the “writerly” protagonists of Johnston and MacLeod, Curtis’s Adam is chosen as caretaker, charged with the responsibility to name and to remember, to memorialize place:

He and his brother Tim had lived at the river. It was their ball park, golf course, paper route, movie house and hockey rink. He could recall the feeling of the tug on baited hooks from the depths of pollen-covered eddies; the jerk of speckled trout; the pull of his first salmon at Papa’s Rock, June 4, 1951. Historical bonfires blazed on a river forever frozen in time that still sang for all its children gone, hymns that were always on the northeast wind. (11)

In the end, Adam discovers, as do the protagonists of MacLeod and Johnston, that the privilege of remembering is no greater than the burden, and that being chosen is an isolating inheritance: “Everything was more empty than before, and he knew it would always be that way. A transparent moon set over the swamp. He lit a cigarette .... He had never felt loneliness before. He thought he had, but he hadn’t. ‘Son of a bitch’” (180).

At the beginning of *Under Eastern Eyes*, Janice Kulyk Keefer asks a question about Maritime literature that still has much relevance: “Where British Columbia has inspired the mytho-poeic exuberance ... where the prairies have compelled profound explorations of moral landscape ... where Ontario fast-breeds sophisticated forms of urban, rural, and cosmopolitan consciousness ... what paradigms do the Maritimes offer besides those of tidal

bores or browsy idylls?"<sup>2</sup> The quick answer is that in the post-Bruce/Buckler period (and I include here, with those above, David Adams Richards, Lynn Coady, Alden Nowlan, and Susan Kerslake) the rural or regional idyll has entirely disappeared, if it ever held vogue, which I seriously doubt. Johnston's struggle with the paradox of place, typical of this shift, could never be mistaken for idyllic:

I have chosen the one profession that makes it impossible for me to live here .... I can only write about this place when I regard it from a distance .... 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 ... someday it will break my heart. (236)

The more considered response to Kulyk Keefer's question is that Maritime writing today laments, perhaps, but does not romanticize place. As the works before me attest, it focuses on a present that has been eroded by outside forces, pressures both economic and cultural. And though the losses have been acute—self-government, trains, fish, jobs, and even family—those losses are buffered by a stubborn capacity to remember, a quality inbred in the Maritime character. It is this capacity to remember, to celebrate what has no urban or topical appeal, that continues to engage Maritime writers. As Curtis writes,

It's hard to believe that families worked together to make homes way to goodness up there with planting, harvesting and threshing crews, and woodcutters and livestock to tend, houses to paint and little flower gardens to plant in the middle of nowhere, as if it mattered. (168)

Of course, *it does matter*, for, as MacLeod writes, "the past ... catches up with you" (186–87), weaving its patterns in the present: "We are probably what we are because of the 1745 rebellion in Scotland.

---

<sup>2</sup>Janice Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987) x.



We are, ourselves, directly or indirectly the children of Culloden Moor, and what happened in its aftermath" (208). These three novels, then, take the position of inherited witness not from any idyllic attachment to the past, but from a sobering loyalty to it. Moreover, their various metaphors for inheritance, including stories real and imagined, embrace the past not as visitation but as living presence.

The appeal of this embrace explains, perhaps, some of the exuberance for MacLeod and Johnston's novels (the lack of a similar response to Curtis is simply the result of his being less well known). In the physical and psychological movements to and from childhood place, in the intense interrogation of witness, borrowed and inherited, in the exploration of secrets lodged deep in the past, and in the memoir-like intimacy of each of these fictions, readers encounter a familiarity unknown in the worldly cosmopolitanism of most contemporary storytelling. In short, these novels bridge a cultural distance many feel in their own country, offering an outpost to those attempting to locate themselves in a world that always seems to be about elsewhere. The three books are field guides to the joy and pain of personal redemption—not of the therapeutic type currently in vogue on afternoon television, but of real connection with roots, place, and family. The tremendous interest in MacLeod's writing, in "Anne Shirley's Island," and in "the postcard outpost[s] of Newfoundland" (Johnston 45), not to mention our unprecedented cultural interest in biography, is proof that people are orphaned and rootless, living lives as commuters, renters, and vagabonds. What the industrial revolution began, the electronic revolution has completed: the near-complete severing of people from their spiritual homes. The discovery made by Curtis's Adam is the hoped-for return: "He had been [home] a month already. He had been here for five generations" (4). Maritime writing continues to focus on just this permanence, this need to belong, to have a history, to "remember blood,"<sup>3</sup> as Charles Bruce phrased it. In literature, the Maritimes continues to be the oldest place in a new land.

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Bruce, *The Channel Shore* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984) i.