A harmony all of their own: problems of Gaelic identity in ‘No Great Mischief’

By Anne Artymiuk

Generally speaking we human beings are social creatures. We organise ourselves in groups, defining ourselves both by what we have in common and what distinguishes us from the other. In the modern society in which most of us live, we have moved on from the need to band together to obtain food or protection from the tribe who lives over the hill, but we still form associations of all kinds. Such institutions serve a dual purpose: they give us a sense of belonging and provide a shorthand definition of who we are. Grouping together seems to have real importance for our mental wellbeing; belonging moves us from disorienting isolationism to the comfort of a group identity, with all the resulting benefits of socialising and self-validation.

Another desire, which appears to be on the increase as more of us move to live in deracinated and urban populations, is to know where we come from and where we ‘fit in’. No-one in pre-industrial Europe needed to research their family history because the likelihood was their families, and the families around them, had lived in the same place for hundreds of years. The official records were in the church registers and the stories were in the inn or by the fireside. People knew where they belonged geographically, historically and culturally. And few appreciated, as the cities grew and sucked in the rural populations, the effect that cutting people off from their roots would have.

Neither the narrator of Alastair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief*,[1] Alexander MacDonald, nor his twin sister Catriona, nor anyone else born into the extended *Clann Chalum Ruaidh* on Cape Breton has any need to suffer from such post-industrial malaise. They are born into a world with a deeply rooted and all-pervasive Gaelic identity, a world held together by the rhythms of working and social lives which are a reflection, pale but still recognisable, of the way their ancestors lived in Scotland.

The markers are all there; history, geography, language, music and most of all, a set of shared cultural values which no-one questions and which can be summed up in the constantly repeated phrase ‘you should always look after your own blood’.

And as if that wasn’t enough these people also have the benefit of what is almost a creation myth; the story of their founding father, Calum Ruadh. Calum Ruadh who, after many trials and hardships in his native land, weathered a dangerous voyage over a great sea and thereafter lived an almost legendary life in a new country, before dying at an extremely great age, leaving behind many descendants.

There can, it seems, be no better example of a people with a stable, valued, persistent, cultural identity than *Clann Chalum Ruaidh*. But as the novel progresses the reader comes to realise that this impression of benign stability is misleading. There are problems associated with the concept of a persistent Gaelic culture, of which two are examined here; the first is the idea that the culture actually persists at all. The second is that for some individuals attempting to fulfil the obligations of the culture into which they were born has damaging effects.

To begin then with the first problematic idea; that the Gaelic culture of Cape Breton is as persistent as it seems. There is an early indication that this might not be so when MacLeod describes the ice through which Alexander’s parents fell. In the days after their loss, he says ‘The ice turned black beneath its own whiteness, as if eaten by a hidden cancer which […] began to make itself visible’ (p. 51): a fitting metaphor for the slow, barely visible way in which the Gaelic certainties of *Clann Chalum Ruaidh* are beginning to erode.

A very brief consideration of each of the markers listed above illustrates this seeping decay.

Language is perhaps the most obvious cultural marker of them all. When the first Calum Ruadh arrived in Nova Scotia he and his children spoke nothing but Gaelic, and since they settled amongst other Gaelic speakers this was not a problem. As time went on and Canada became more closely drawn into Britain’s imperial project English became more important. Tactics that had worked in Britain to cripple Irish and Gaelic were applied in Nova Scotia too. We were not, points out Alexander, ‘of the generation that was beaten because they uttered Gaelic […]

beaten so they would learn English and become good Canadian citizens' (p. 16). Presumably there was no longer a need for such measures; by the time of the novel English is the dominant language in most of Canada. Gaelic is not wholly dead, in a domestic setting Gaelic has survived all official attempts at repression, but in the years following the Second World War, the years of Alexander's youth, the question is whether the language can survive the pressures of the modern world? As mass media expands, as more exciting educational opportunities open up elsewhere and the lack of employment forces people to leave Cape Breton, English becomes more important, and Gaelic less relevant to the younger generation. Gaelic hasn't totally disappeared; when Alexander's surviving brothers became peripatetic miners they spoke Gaelic amongst themselves 'more and more' (p. 127); the language proving a useful demarcation tool in a workplace full of diverse groupings from within Canada and beyond.

But away from the pressure to present themselves as a unified group, and as time passes, Gaelic falls away. Alexander never describes himself as using Gaelic in his day-to-day life: and there is no mention of him using it with his children in order to pass it on to the next generation. Even the conversations he has with his with his own Calum Ruadh, in Toronto and on the final drive back to Nova Scotia, are in English. If ever surely there was a time for Calum to revert to Gaelic, described so often as the language of their hearts, it is as he returns to Cape Breton knowing he is about to die. His last words are 'We're almost home' (p. 260) and it seems odd that he should say this in English rather than use the Gaelic '*cha mhòr nach eil sinn dhachaidh*'. Perhaps years of living in multi-cultural Toronto where English is the only common tongue has driven his Gaelic out. The one person of Alexander's generation who regrets the loss of Gaelic is his twin sister Catriona. Catriona sees, or perhaps hears, Gaelic everywhere; in her dreams, in a random hotel in Aberdeen and, on her pilgrimage to Moidart, she claims that Gaelic 'poured out of her, like a subterranean river' (p. 150). While there are subtle indications in the text that this latter statement may not be strictly accurate, there can be no doubt that Catriona wants it to be true.

Perhaps the only place that Gaelic is still secure is in the songs the people sing. Music was an important part of Alexander's life as a child. He retains clear memories of the winter ceilidhs his parents hosted in their lighthouse, when the frozen ice in the channel would allow neighbours to cross to them with fiddles and accordions and people stayed up all night making music and dancing. It is the

songs that in one form or another live on into the adult lives of Alexander and his siblings, and it is worth noting that from the first song mentioned, *Cumha Ceap Breatuinn* (The Lament for Cape Breton), sung by the alcoholic Calum in Toronto, to the last of them, *Fuadal nan Gael* (The Dispersal of the Highlanders) which Catriona and Alexander sing together one afternoon in Calgary, all are sad; melancholy is the dark base on which the Gaelic music and song they know are built. But this too the twins are losing; unlike those who went before them, Alexander and Catriona are no longer producers, but simply consumers, of music; and the music they consume is not the music of their people and their story, but classical music which they access through concert subscriptions. And this gradual fading away, through a combination of external pressure and carelessness is voiced again towards the end of the book by Alexander's dementia plagued grandmother. In a novel full of poignant phrases surely one of the most poignant is her statement that 'Some of (our) songs were long […] it wasn't until the radio came that we thought maybe our songs were too long' (p. 250). Suddenly the Gaels are holding part of their culture to a new external standard, and they find it wanting.

As far as geography goes, *Clann Chalum Ruaidh* belong, and always have belonged, to Cape Breton. There they farm and fish but they are doing nothing more than wringing a subsistence-level existence from the soil and the sea, and before long many of the men are forced to seek seasonal employment elsewhere. Some families leave altogether. Of Alexander's own generation, none live in Cape Breton. Alexander settles in Windsor, his twin sister Catriona in Calgary, their oldest brother Calum in Toronto. Of the other two surviving siblings, one moves to British Columbia, and the other to Scotland. The sad fact is that Cape Breton proved no more capable of sustaining an economically viable population than Moidart did.

History, its uses and interpretations, is a huge concern in this novel. The MacDonalds of Cape Breton are all aware of the national and familial history they share. Their story, and hence their idea of themselves, rests on the twin pillars of national struggle, which foregrounds the figure of the Fighting Highlander, and the history of clan displacement, most obviously written in the heroic, almost mythic figure of the first Calum Ruadh. But these certainties, clung to by former generations are losing their power for younger people. Alexander's maternal grandfather gives him two possible pictures of the clansmen returning from

Killiecrankie, victorious warriors glorious in the autumn sunshine or wounded and demoralised men struggling back to their mountain homes. Alexander's other grandfather says he 'likes the first picture best' (p. 85) but in the face of this stated preference Alexander himself is mute. *No Great Mischief* returns again and again to the stories of fighting Highlanders; at Killiecrankie, at Culloden, at Quebec. But all this 'glorious' military history which fuels a particular, and powerful, idea of Gaeldom, a history in which *Clann Chalum Ruaidh* knows its place and its value, is not helpful in contemporary terms. Military glory, in victory, or more often in defeat, can teach them nothing about how to live in the modern world.

Perhaps the one thing that means most, the marker that is still evident even down to Alexander's own generation is that of shared cultural values; the ideas that you must accept what life brings you and make the most of it, that family solidarity is a strength in times of trouble or attack, and above all else that 'you must always look after your own blood'. This is laudable, but also in modern times, naïve. The story of how the selfish, venal American Alexander MacDonald betrays his Cape Breton blood, illustrates all too clearly how the unscrupulous can exploit those who cling to old imperatives of family solidarity.

But how about the posited second 'problem'; the proposition that living up to their Gaelic heritage can be damaging for some individuals? The individual always pays a price for the privilege of belonging to the group and it is instructive to see how this is worked out in *No Great Mischief* through a brief consideration of the lives of Alexander, Catriona and Calum.

Starting with Catriona, we see her from a very early age absenting herself from her Gaelic heritage when, at seventeen, she attempts to dye a silver streak in her characteristically black MacDonald hair. In this she succeeds, but once she tires of the effect she finds herself unable to re-dye the streak black again. This symbolises the whole relationship she has with her Gaelic identity; she carelessly casts it off in her late teens, only to embark on a feverish quest to reconnect with it later. When marriage, motherhood and material comfort in Alberta fail to satisfy her or teach her who she is, she yearns after what she has lost. It is Catriona who mourns her lost Gaelic, Catriona who takes every opportunity she has to travel to Scotland, and Catriona who makes contact with the MacDonalds in Moidart. Catriona rejected a culture in which she seemed to have no place, but decades later finds she longs for it to accept and (re)contain her, although however hard

she tries she cannot find the right way back.

If Catriona's response to what we might term her birth identity has left her lost, her brother Alexander is crippled, a fact deftly illustrated by his encounter at a conference with his fellow orthodontist, the American Bill Miller.

In his description of this meeting MacLeod employs a technique he uses often by showing people who have a lot in common but who are themselves completely different. Both Alexander and Bill Miller come from immigrant families who have fled persecution in Europe and determined to build new lives for themselves in North America. Both come from a rich cultural heritage, Gaelic or Germanic. Both have become successful professional men. And there the similarities end and the differences begin, as MacLeod makes them representative of the contrast between those who honour their pasts and those who reject them. Bill Miller knows nothing of his origins beyond the fact that his family name was changed. '[…] my grandfather or someone did [it]. To be more American. To fit in or whatever' (p. 55). Bill Miller is ignorant about the world and cares for nothing it seems but money. And yet – Bill Miller is happy, Bill Miller is fulfilled and most importantly Bill Miller is not haunted by the past.

Contrast that with Alexander who was brought up in a tradition that cherished its origins and constantly looks back to a land that has not been the family's home for generations. Is Alexander happy? Is he fulfilled? He is not. Alexander ekes out a muted half-life in Windsor; not really absorbed in either his professional or his family life. He is bound to and by the past, he seems to live much of his life in it, he draws occasional comfort from it, but it has limited him. It is no coincidence that, as he remembers his conversation with Bill Miller, Alexander walks past a girl wearing a tee-shirt with the slogan 'Living in the past is not living up to our potential' (p. 56).

The eldest of the MacDonald siblings, Calum, is the one who suffers most for his attempts to live within the ethos of his Gaelic identity. He has too much responsibility thrust upon him at too young an age, and takes more on himself as he strives to fulfil the repeated obligation to look after his own blood. It is Calum who confides to Alexander the guilt he has held close since their parents died beneath the ice. 'If you had been with them,' says Alexander, 'you would have gone down too'. But Calum says 'I look at it differently. If I had been with them I might have saved them' (p. 193). What a burden for a young man of seventeen to

take up; what a burden for him to live with through the decades that follow. But however hard it is, he remains true to the tenets of his upbringing which is why he agrees to take into his fold of reliable MacDonalds the *unreliable* American MacDonald: because he owes a debt to his grandparents for taking in his twin siblings when he couldn't look after them, and of course because you should always look after your own blood. And from that one good thing, that one act which his community expects of him, comes theft and deceit, violence and murder; the ruination of the life of a rough but kindly man who did what he had been brought up to do and paid a dreadful price. In MacLeod's universe it is not just dogs it seems who try too hard and care too much.

Lost people, lost causes, lost possibilities; these seem to be the price that MacLeod says we pay for knowing our stories, for recognising the place we come from and acknowledging the ties and responsibilities that come with belonging to a tightly defined and supportive cultural group. It is a high price, but for MacLeod perhaps not too high. For although the concerns expressed here are concentrated on the darker side, on the cost of belonging, and of the moulding, sometimes constricting forces of tradition and expectation, if this was not more than outweighed by the benefits to individuals of belonging, cultures would never thrive.

And certainly the novel ends on a positive note. Throughout the book MacLeod has used the freshwater spring on the island of the lighthouse as a symbol of the life-affirming culture of the Gaels of Cape Breton. And in the closing lines he conjures it again: 'Out on the island the neglected freshwater well pours forth its gift of sweetness into the whitened darkness of the night' (p. 262).

Here there is both life and sweetness, but it not forced upon those who do not want it. It is simply there, freely, eternally accessible to all who wish to seek it out, to all those who, for whatever reason, will find in it an aid to lighten the darkness of their night.Generally speaking we human beings are social creatures. We organise ourselves in groups, defining ourselves both by what we have in common and what distinguishes us from the other. In the modern society in which most of us live, we have moved on from the need to band together to obtain food or protection from the tribe who lives over the hill, but we still form associations of all kinds. Such institutions serve a dual purpose: they give us a sense of belonging and provide a shorthand definition of who we are. Grouping together seems to have real importance for our mental wellbeing; belonging moves us from

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(c) The Bottle Imp