PLACE is a powerful and compelling marker in the "collective unconscious". From the Highland clearances of Scotland, to the more recent exodus to the cities, to the journey towards old age and death, this collection – Island – is about place and memory, and about real and imagined settings.

Landscapes, in these stories, are invested with as many layers of meaning as the layers of ore in the mines that feature alongside the fisheries and farms as the core sites of activity generating survival and abundance, and sometimes death.

The tone of many stories is eulogistic, mourning a past or lost tradition and the threatened loss of family ties, purpose, meaning and identity. The inhabitants of Alistair MacLeod’s beloved corner of the world – Cape Breton, Nova Scotia – are profoundly enmeshed in their geographic and linguistic (Gaelic) identity, history and heritage.

This covers such diverse elements as Gaelic musical heritage (The Tuning of Perfection), legend and superstition (As Birds Bring Forth the Sun), and an earthy physicality around manual labour and sex.
the Sun, Vision), an earthy physicality around manual labour and sex (The Closing Down of Summer) and a close relationship with the seasons, nature and animals (In the Fall, Second Spring, Winter Dog).

As well, there is a singular connectedness to Cape Breton (Island, Clearances) that is in the bones of the characters, just as the ancestral lands and customs are in their genes. The collection demonstrates a potent and poignant sense of the "collective unconscious". The elemental landscapes of Nova Scotia sharply evoke their Scottish antecedents, such as Skye, just as the very large interconnected families embody the idea – and ideal – of the clan. But in the face of change, modernity, technology and tourism, it is a dying order and way of life.

The deep connection to place is well understood by indigenous Australians and for those who lived on the land since their families, like the Nova Scotians, migrated also largely from Britain. Cape Breton is a long way from urban or even rural Australia, but some of the main themes of the stories – compulsive love of the landscape one knows best and resistance to change and, its opposite, the urge to escape a narrow existence – translate easily into other settings. The use of a first-person narrator creates an immediate and direct connection to the reader.

Imaginative landscapes have deep links to memory and demonstrate strong emotions surrounding longing and belonging. It is through the power of memory and imagining that MacLeod is able to harness his experience of place to his writing craft and reconstruct and shape it within this dignified memoir of his homeland. Yet as such it's also reconstituted – invested with layers of emotion and meaning, and this is conveyed strongly in the stories themselves. Since the stories are fictional, not simply journalistic, they involve processes of re-imagining and creative reconstruction.

The "real" physical landscape – the moods of the sea, the natural features of the Cape – is the first landscape we encounter as readers. MacLeod's lyrical detail captures vivid images that are imprinted on the characters' psyches. Each story contains some potent description, like the opening section from The Lost Salt Gift of Blood: "Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. It bathes the blunt grey rocks that loom yearningly out towards Europe and it touches upon the stunted spruce and the low-lying lichens and the delicate hardy ferns and the ganglia-rooted moss and the tiny tough rock cranberries. The grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise..."
from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise marauders. Everything before them and beneath them has been rapidly, briefly and thoroughly drenched and now the clear droplets catch and hold the sun's infusion in a myriad of (sic) rainbow colours." (118)

The technique of layering and building with "ands" has a breathless emotive impact. In addition, the passage illustrates several ways in which the writer imbues the landscape with human meaning, using metaphor and personification to give human qualities to the elements - the rocks "loom yearningly", squalls become "marauders".

Later in the section the gulls flap "their wings pompously against their breasts like overconditioned he-men . . ." And, in strong body imagery, the harbour curves "like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing the life that now lies within it", with the sea "forcing itself gently but inevitably through the tightness of the opening" (119).

There is also the idea of and reference to other places - Europe, Dublin - evoking origins, ancestors and, for some, a yearning towards elsewhere, towards escape.

In The Vastness of the Dark the narrator's need to escape the mining life and the static present is ambivalent, but "forward" movement (Clearances) is embraced, even in the face of what is unfamiliar and potentially hostile. The imagined new landscapes hold their own threat, from Springhill to Blind River, as the generational shift and pull towards something else is played out. In The Road to Rankin's Point there is strong irony surrounding inter-generational loss.

Idealisation is part of the internal and internalised landscape of the characters in many of the stories. Home is a profoundly central motif in most and influences the characters' sense of past, present and future in complex ways.

In The Return the positive projections and reconstructions based on the father's past landscapes and experiences are tested in the present when he takes his wife and son to Cape Breton for the first time.

He is teary at the first glimpse; his wife does not share his attachment. The themes of class and upward mobility also feature, as the son relishes the freedom and informal "play" among his cousins, while his over-protective, city-based mother is horrified by the rawness and lack of sophistication of the tobacco-chewing locals.

And his father is anxious to mediate between his family of origin and the family he made when he left the Cape. The ideal of a happy reconnection falls far short of his imaginings. As they settle in for the return to Montreal the metaphorical journey of uniting present and past is unresolved. The clash of cultures is exacerbated by the visit to introduce "home" and the narrator states with symbolic intent:

"We have come from a great distance and have a long way now to go." (97)

In To Everything There is a Season the idealisation of past family life and the need to let go is demonstrated in the shift towards a mature
and the need to let go is demonstrated in the shift towards a mature acceptance and growing up to the realisation that Santa Claus does not exist and change is inevitable. The cycle of life, like the cycle of the seasons, is about flux that must flow forward. But the attachment to past and place, and longing for continuity persist.

This is echoed on a much larger scale in other stories, especially *Clearances*, where the Clearances of the ancestral Highlands are echoed in the clearances on the island and their place in the cycle of resettlement and new settlement.

In this story the collie dog forges the connection between Scotland and Nova Scotia. This and many other stories mourn the passing of tradition and modes of existence – and often the clash of vision and values between the older and younger generations around education and working life.

In *The Boat* the central motif is imprinted on the narrator's psyche and is a symbol of both survival and risk in the uncertain life of the fisherman and his family, and carries the potent connection between work and survival and the place of nature and the elements. The closing story and the opening story together create a circle of life with a melancholy and uncertain tinge to the process of renewal.

The *Island* collection brings together landscapes of the past – internal and external – family experience and physical experience of the natural setting of Cape Breton and the activities located on it. The emotional power of the stories and the skill and poetry of MacLeod’s prose uncover the universal amid the specific – themes of attachment, belonging, longing and idealisation are timeless.

**Further reading:**


*No Great Mischief*. Alistair Macleod, McClelland & Stewart, 1999

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Colleen Keane is a freelance writer and librarian with a PhD in literature.
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