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Shoring against Our Ruin: Sheldon Currie, Alistair MacLeod, and the Heritage Preservation Narrative

THOMAS HODD

ATLANTIC CANADA IS KNOWN for its strong identification with its European heritage, and its celebration of cultural traditions that are deeply rooted in the history of the region and its communities. Whether Irish or Scottish, Acadian or Loyalist, such ethnic groups find their voices through the countless festivals, historical reenactments, and crafted images that are produced each year for visitors and locals alike. Yet this celebration of culture is a double-edged sword: often there is considerable state involvement in deciding how such heritage traditions are represented, since many of these cultural spectacles require the economic assistance of the state in order to be produced. Further complicating the issue is the region's history of economic underdevelopment, as well as the recent flourishing of Atlantic Canada's heritage tourism industry, which has exacerbated an already contentious debate among politicians, capitalists, and artisans concerning the true value of heritage.

Two Maritime writers who explore this issue of cultural authenticity are Sheldon Currie and Alistair MacLeod. Although published almost a decade apart, Currie's "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" (1977) and MacLeod's "The Tuning of Perfection" (1984) present similar narratives that warn of increased commodification of Scottish cultural at the hands of the tourism market. More importantly, both stories represent what I term a "heritage preservation narrative," comprised of several clearly defined characteristics, through which Currie and MacLeod express their frustration over an exploitative industry that threatens to erase authentic heritage traditions from the region.

Before exploring the ways in which this narrative strategy operates, it is important to understand the regional economic conditions to which Currie and MacLeod are responding in their respective stories, as well as the broad theoretical space that "authenticity" occupies in recent

heritage studies. A growing number of regional scholars have suggested that Atlantic Canada has been driven for some time by a service economy that capitalizes on the popularity of traditional East Coast culture. In “Atlantic Canada and ‘the End of History’: Postmodernism and Regional Underdevelopment,” Marc Epprecht notes that the region has suffered from increasing deindustrialization since the Second World War and that governments of late have been “actively seeking to promote the one ‘industry’ where Atlantic Canada can possibly retain a comparative advantage — tourism” (448). Recent provincial studies offer similar observations: cultural geographer James Overton, for instance, contends in *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture, and Development in Newfoundland* (1997) that the province’s diminishing fish stocks and struggling primary industries have forced successive Newfoundland governments to look to tourism as an economic stopgap. Likewise, Ian McKay argues persuasively in *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (1994) that “idyllic” representations of Nova Scotian life are the result of the tourism industry’s efforts to homogenize and commodify the province’s cultural diversity in the economic interests of the state. Indeed, government-sponsored heritage initiatives are by no means a recent phenomenon. In “Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954,” McKay reveals how Premier Angus L. MacDonald attempted to rebrand Nova Scotia in the 1930s and 1940s as a Scottish heritage destination in order to validate marginalized Nova Scotians of Scottish descent and to “surmount the province’s religious divisions” (19). His government invested heavily in tourist accommodation projects and was pivotal in the construction of the Cabot Trail. MacDonald also promoted the concept of a uniformly “Scottish” heritage tradition within the province by “tartanizing” tourist destinations such as the Keltic Lodge, championing the construction of a Highland piper at the New Brunswick-Nova Scotia border, and lobbying to have Nova Scotia become the first province to officially adopt a tartan. The result of such endeavours, McKay argues, was a resounding success, fuelled chiefly by MacDonald’s belief in romanticized Scottish traditions and the “redemptive role of tourism” (9).

Such commodified representations of heritage have yielded their detractors, mostly intellectuals and cultural elites who see the government’s involvement in shaping heritage as a display of power that

exploits culture and history for capitalist gain. But to accept the position that a culture's heritage can flourish without government involvement is a bit premature, especially when we consider the main reason that such tourism initiatives appear in the first place. As Erik Cohen points out, "commoditization often hits a culture *not when it is flourishing, but when it is actually already in decline*" (382; emphasis added). He believes that promoting tourism can yield significant benefits — namely, that "the emergence of a tourist market facilitates the preservation of a cultural tradition which would otherwise perish [and] enables its bearers to maintain a meaningful local or ethnic identity which they might otherwise have lost" (382). What Cohen neglects to consider, however, is that the culture being commodified may contribute to its own cultural demise by choosing to pander to tourist needs: "while the labor expended to produce such items is potentially lucrative, the more the artists/craftspeople, out of necessity, cater only to tourists, the more the artists tend to remove those elements of style and content that might offend the unknown buyer" (Llewellyn Watson and Kopachevsky 652). Dean MacCannell suggests that such forms of "reconstructed ethnicity" are of detriment to the culture in decline, since these public acts of cultural preservation involve "a final freezing of ethnic imagery which is artificial and deterministic, even, or especially, when it is based on a drive for authenticity" ("Reconstructed" 168).

MacCannell's comments emphasize authenticity as a key consideration in understanding the cultural politics of heritage tourism. Indeed, studies have shown that the notion of "authenticity" is a defining feature of heritage sites and tourist prerequisites. Gaynor Bagnall finds that tourists cite authenticity is an integral part of the experience (241), that it acts as "a legitimator during consumption [and] justifies the choice they have made" (245). Similarly, Jonathan Culler declares that "tourists . . . set out in quest of the authentic" (158), a quest that involves "the production of or participation in a sign relation between marker and sight" (160). For Culler, the tourist industry consists of semiotic relationships built on the premise that authenticity is the central goal of sites and tourists. The irony, he notes, is that "to be experienced as authentic [the sight or souvenir] must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes" (164). However, the heritage industry succeeds in cir-

cumventing this “authenticity” dilemma by offering “plausibility rather than accuracy” (Bagnall 237), a distinction that enables it to focus solely on what the tourist wants instead of what the heritage tradition represents. Thus, the industry can wield power and control over how heritage traditions are interpreted, so long as the images that it offers are faithful to tourists’ expectations. In short, “Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority” (Crew and Sims 163).

Two Maritime writers who explore this power struggle between “authentic” heritage traditions and “inauthentic” cultural productions are Sheldon Currie and Alistair MacLeod. Their work in particular draws on Cape Breton’s historical Scottish roots, a rich cultural tradition that continually informs their fiction and figures prominently in critical discussions: James O. Taylor, for instance, has articulated the presence of Celtic themes in Currie’s “The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum” (see “Celtic Themes”); likewise, many critics have examined the influence of Scottish heritage on the work of MacLeod. What few scholars have noted are the ways in which notable stories by Currie and MacLeod address a pressing cultural issue in the Atlantic region: increased state involvement in representations of heritage. Although published almost a decade apart, Currie’s “The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum” and MacLeod’s “The Tuning of Perfection” offer similar narratives that warn of the power of industrialization and the increasing threat of the commodification of Scottish cultural at the hands of the tourism market. More importantly, both stories represent a heritage preservation narrative, which is comprised of several key elements: (1) a defined heritage tradition: that is, a host of symbols that define the presence or celebration of a particular culture in the story, such as the Irish or Scottish; (2) a perceived threat to the culture’s existence, usually in the form of a capitalist character or industry attempting to exploit or commodify the story’s central heritage tradition; (3) a multigenerational text that displays varying levels of “heritage knowledge” — that is, older characters who remember and practise the culture’s rituals and traditions, younger characters who understand but do not recognize the importance of their heritage, and culturally ignorant characters who exist outside the sphere of the story’s central heritage tradition; (4) an interpreter figure who attempts to preserve the culture under threat by stirring the “spirit of heritage” in both older and younger characters through education or performance; and (5) a class of preservation motifs that serves to heighten the underlying heritage

tension in the text through images such as notebooks, tape recorders, museum artifacts, and/or environmental symbols. Collectively, these five elements enable Currie and MacLeod to express their frustration over a cultural industry that threatens to erase authentic heritage traditions from Atlantic Canada.

“The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum” was published just ten years after the construction of the real museum from which Currie takes his title, the Cape Breton Miners’ Museum. It contains mining artifacts, a nearby re-creation of a miner’s village, and the famous Men of the Deeps choir. At the heart of the museum lies the Ocean Deeps Colliery, a coal mine located beneath the museum building that includes guided tours by retired miners. Understandably, it was celebrated as the town’s Expo ’67 showpiece when it first opened. What few people mentioned, however, was its misrepresentation of history: although the museum contained enchanting exhibits, it invariably represented a nostalgic gaze toward regional economic history by actively obscuring the industry’s harsh realities: worker exploitation, economic instability, and regional turmoil. Cape Breton’s coal-mining industry struggled after the Second World War, and by the 1960s only half of the original mines were still in operation. When the federal government took over management of the mines — just four weeks before the Cape Breton Miners’ Museum opened — its stated objective was to phase out all mining in the region by 1981. This strategy was cut short due to the 1970s oil crisis, which briefly resurrected the failing industry, but the end was in sight. Thus, in an effort to assuage growing levels of unemployment in the region, the Cape Breton Miners’ Museum was built, a form of cultural commodification that transformed the hardships of mining life into a friendly tourist experience.

It is in this context of industrial decline and tourist façade that one must read “The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum,” for to ignore the heritage site to which Currie is responding is to miss a critical aspect of the story’s effect. Seen in this light, “Museum” is not only a condemnation of the mining industry’s exploitation of a region and its people but also a gloss of an industrial heritage site that, in Currie’s opinion, fails to represent the “authentic” lived experience of the mining community.

The presence of a definable Scottish heritage in the story is exemplified chiefly through the character of Neil Currie. Presented as

a larger-than-life figure, when he first enters the White Rose Café, he immediately overwhelms Margaret with his presence: “The first time I ever saw the bugger, I thought to myself, him as big as he is, me as small as I am, if he was astraddle on the road, naked, I could walk under him without a hair touching” (211). And when he approaches Margaret in her booth, “it seemed like it got darker when he stood in front of me, he blacked out so much light with the size of him” (213). Neil is not just a man; to Margaret, he is a mythical figure — a giant of sorts, capable of awesome deeds.

His weapon of choice is bagpipes, which he plays in the middle of the café to the dismay of the occupants and owners, who eventually throw him out. He also speaks Gaelic, which enables him to decipher the song requests that Margaret’s grandfather hastily scribbles on his notepad, thus aligning him with the older generations of Cape Breton despite his youth. Moreover, knowing Gaelic is a point of contention for Neil: he was fired from his last mining job because he would not speak English to the foreman (216). But this linguistic defiance is not simply a matter of personal pride for him: the cultural and nationalist implications of this rebellious act serve as a semiotic echo of the historical conflict between the English and Scots. His sense of history and place within a greater Scottish diaspora, however, is best revealed in a single, powerful exchange between him and Ian about the price that their Scottish ancestors paid for coming to the New World:

“There’s no future,” Neil would say.

“There has to be a future.”

“See in the bedroom, Ian. See your grandfather. That’s the future.”

“Well he’s there. The future is there.”

“He’s there all right. He can’t breathe, he can’t talk, he can’t walk. You know the only thing he’s got? Some old songs in his head, that he can hardly remember, that your father hardly ever knew and you don’t know at all. Came here and lost their tongues, their music, their songs. Everything but their shovels.” (221)

Ian’s grandfather is arguably only a shell of his younger self, yet his having lived to old age gives Ian hope that he too will survive the mines. But he fails to recognize or accept that his grandfather possesses little quality of life, that this once proud miner can no longer walk, speak, or

even breathe without the help of Margaret or her mother. Moreover, the few memories that the old man still has of his culture are fast eroding, along with his body, and once he dies his knowledge of the past will die with him. Neil understands the cultural and metaphysical implications of this notion and rightly chastises Ian for shirking his obligation in learning about his family heritage.

The above exchange between Ian and Neil highlights a further element of the heritage preservation narrative: the presence of a perceived threat to the story's defined heritage tradition. Neil's phrase "Everything but their shovels" quoted above is a subtle reference to the coal-mining companies that have exploited Cape Breton workers and families for decades, a notion that Currie addresses more poignantly in *The Company Store* (1988). Never clearly named, this ever-present danger to Scottish heritage is woven into the story through repeated references to the effects of the company's endeavours: the deaths of Margaret's father and her brother, Charlie Dave; the physical incapacity of Margaret's grandfather; the song that Neil writes for Margaret about her brother's tragic end in the mine; and the eventual deaths of Neil, Ian, and Margaret's grandfather. These telling allusions serve to heighten the company's sense of control over the miners and reinforce its awesome power against a weaker, impoverished community. In short, the coal mine and its owners serve as both backdrops to the story and indirect forms of characterization that help to drive the story's central heritage tension. With each death, more and more of the community's collective heritage memory is being buried with the men who fall prey to the mine.

Neil, then, represents a cultural bridge between the new generation of Cape Bretoner and the old as he seeks ways to help preserve Cape Breton's disappearing Scottish traditions. A bard of sorts, he attempts to resurrect the spirit of Scottish heritage in Margaret's grandfather and introduce the importance of heritage to Margaret, who together represent a generational gap between those who understand the value of heritage and those who do not. Margaret's grandfather, a man who has witnessed and remembers the fruits of his culture, represents what may be called "the Old World." Unfortunately, the coal dust has left him with only a scribbler pad by which to convey his desires, a haunting fate for a man whose culture is chiefly oral but who is forced to adopt the instruments of a written culture in order to express himself. His

granddaughter Margaret, on the other hand, represents a new generation of Cape Bretoner, one that has little interest in or understanding of its Scottish traditions. Her reaction to seeing Neil's bagpipes is one of surprise and reveals the extent of her cultural ignorance: "Bagpipes! I never seen bagpipes before. Never knew there was any. Never heard them before" (214). In short, Margaret does not initially recognize Neil as a champion of Scottish culture: she sees him as a modern-day knight errant who will save her from the doldrums of daily mining life.

During their courting period, Margaret begins to appreciate Neil's passion for keeping his Scottish heritage alive. She develops a genuine interest in his playing and is excited at the prospect of Neil writing a song for her. For his part, his rebellious nature is soon tempered by his wish to get married. His public resistance to the mining company cannot sustain itself under the weight of wanting to prove that he can provide for Margaret as a husband; he soon gets a job at the No. 10 mine, working alongside her brother, Ian. But he maintains his spirit of defiance by shifting to acts of personal resistance, choosing, for example, to build his own house rather than "live in a company house" (219); likewise, his complaints about the company are relegated to drunken arguments with Ian in the comfortable privacy of Margaret's home. Ironically, it is Ian, not Neil, who suggests solutions for dealing with the exploitative working conditions of the miners:

Ian would tell Neil that the only hope for the miner was to vote CCF and get a labour government.

"How are you going to manage that?"

"By voting. Organizing."

"When is that going to happen?"

"We have to work for it." (220)

Ian believes that they must work within the system to effect change. Neil, however, is unmoved by such union rhetoric and becomes frustrated by Ian's inability to comprehend that the issue at stake is not their daily lives but their cultural survival.

The one character who acts on Neil's concerns is Margaret. Unfortunately, it takes Neil's, her grandfather's, and Ian's deaths to help motivate her to preserve her family heritage. Subsequently, the end of "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" becomes a fictional display case of preservation images: the conversion of her house into a museum; her grandfather's scribbles; medicinal symbols of preservation through her

bottling of family body parts; and a copy of the taped interview between her and the unnamed tourist, which serves as a folklorist's main means for preserving oral cultures. To Margaret, any object has the potential to become part of the collection, but not everything has the same value: "A lot of things are not keeping as well as we would like, but it's better than nothing. Perhaps you could give us a copy of your tape when you get it done. That might make a nice item. It's hard to get real good things and you hate to fill up with junk just to have something" (226). Margaret wants the artifacts to be meaningful and not have the museum "filled with junk"; her primary concern is that they truthfully and faithfully represent her past. Moreover, Margaret's voice being recorded for the museum's first tourist (folklorist?) reflects a certain level of postmodern irony since "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" represents the transcription of an oral tale — a "behind the scenes" look at the creation of a museum. Currie's offering of a story through transcription, then, acts as an "authenticating" device that serves to further punctuate the importance of preservation.

Margaret's creation of the museum also reflects her response to a pragmatic dilemma: the passing of her male family members means that Margaret will need to support herself financially because she cannot work in the mine. Her solution is to follow the lead of other communities in the region and create a museum. But this museum is not a romanticized version of heritage preservation like the real Cape Breton Miners' Museum. Instead, her main artifacts include her grandfather's lungs, Neil's lungs, tongue, and fingers, and Ian's penis — preserved body parts that are grotesque and disturbing, doubly so since they invariably signify the body as a whole, whether present or not. Margaret's intention is not to shield tourists from the reality of mining life but to force them to confront it. These harsh images serve as a fictional foil to the pleasant tourist attractions found in the real heritage site that Currie is responding to in his story. The resulting tension between the enticing artifacts of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum and Margaret's less glamorous choices also exemplifies what MacCannell labels a dialectic between regions of tourism (*Tourist*). He argues that the "front" region is the spectacle of the site, the exotic and romantic aspects of heritage, whereas the "back" region is the postmodern notion of the "truly authentic" tourist experience. Understood in these terms, the Cape Breton Miners' Museum becomes the alluring spectacle, whereas

Margaret's museum represents, through its grim exhibits, a more accurate depiction of mining life.

Uwe Zagratski believes that Currie's story "reveals a fierce, Swiftian sarcasm towards the *tartanization* of Nova Scotia" (307). But to accept his argument would be to misinterpret the role of characters such as Neil Currie or even Margaret's grandfather as validations of Scottish heritage in Cape Breton. I would contend the opposite: what Currie ultimately reveals through the fictional creation of "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" is that the region is beginning to move away from its primary industry and toward a newer, more culturally commodified space, a space that seeks to undermine and exploit the region's authentic Scottish roots. Furthermore, by creating his own authenticating version of an industry heritage museum, he succeeds in challenging the "authority" of the province's vision of mining culture claimed by sites such as the Cape Breton Miners' Museum.

MacLeod is equally concerned with the role that heritage plays in the shaping of Cape Breton culture. Yet the prevailing tone in his fiction is not so much a celebration of Scottish heritage as it is a concern for losing touch with his cultural roots. Colin Nicholson remarks that there is "an abiding note of loss and of regret [in MacLeod's writing], with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of choric threnody" (98). Indeed, several critics have commented on his struggle with loss and exile; of particular note is Christopher Gittings, who argues that MacLeod's work "textualizes the breakdown of Gaelic culture and simultaneously, in the inscription of this breakdown in narratives that draw on the Gaelic folkways of Cape Breton and the history of the Clearances, moves toward a preservation of this culture" (96). Gittings focuses on "The Road to Rankin Point" as a key text to illustrate his reading, yet subsequent stories display this theme of loss and exile as well. Jane Urquhart notes in her afterword to the New Canadian Library edition of *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* that "MacLeod's stories are resonant with the lamentations of exiles, and strong within these lamentations is the desire to preserve that which was, and even that which is" (171). She uses "Vision" to demonstrate her point, whereas other critics have reached similar conclusions using "The Closing Down of Summer" or "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun."

One often overlooked story in MacLeod's oeuvre is "The Tuning of Perfection." Although many refer to it, the majority of critics offer

only limited critical treatment of the story, especially in relation to its theme of heritage loss. What criticism does exist is found chiefly in earlier studies: Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests that Archibald “brings into difficult and costly balance his loyalty to the integrity of the past . . . and his recognition of the permanence of loss and change for the worse” (115). Comparably, Alan R. Young argues that “‘The Tuning of Perfection’ offers some hope for the threatened Gaelic culture that Archibald represents” (344). Recent interpretations of the story, however, focus on Archibald’s artistic integrity rather than his attempt to preserve a Scottish past. Taylor contends that “the difference between genuine and fraudulent art is actually the theme developed in ‘The Tuning of Perfection’” (“Art” 61), while David Creelman notes that Archibald’s “dream of his long dead wife . . . reinforces his commitment to his personal artistic vision” (“Hoping” 91). For Creelman and Taylor, Archibald is an artist who refuses to compromise his art for popular taste.

Read in the context of heritage analysis, however, Archibald represents an aging cultural figure who possesses a specific vision of what heritage should be and refuses to compromise that vision, acting more like an interpreter of Scottish heritage than an artist figure. Part of this vision involves a gift for Gaelic singing and his sense of responsibility in maintaining the “old way” of performing cultural narratives. His unique ability draws the attention of folklorists, who claim to have “‘discovered’ him in the 1960s and for whom he had made various tapes and recordings” (92); to them, he is “‘the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers.’ He was faithfully recorded in the archives at Sydney and Halifax and Ottawa and his picture had appeared in various scholarly and less scholarly journals” (92). The folklorists, mostly academics, tout him as an “authentic” singer who is both natural and real in his expression of the Gaelic tradition. Although MacLeod is poking fun at himself and the academic world that he inhabits, the narrator points out that Archibald “didn’t really mind the folklorists” (92). In fact, he respects their obsessive nature over proper enunciation and accurate footnoting because he recognizes in their efforts a form of “care and seriousness in much the same way that he filed and set his saws or structured his wood-pile” (93). Thus, he sees value in their efforts to “faithfully” preserve his culture and obliges their requests.

Those focused on money rather than cultural value soon threaten this idyllic notion of culture. For instance, when his granddaughter Sal mentions an upcoming television program that requires Gaelic singers, Archibald is “interested and cautious at the same time” (96). She, however, is indifferent to the television program. In fact, her motive is based not on wanting to communicate her Scottish heritage but on travelling to Halifax for a holiday:

“There’ll be a few days of rehearsal there and then some concerts and we’ll be on television. I can hardly wait. I have to do lots of shopping in Halifax and it will be a chance to sleep in without Tom bothering me. . . .”

“What do they want us to sing?” he asked.

“Oh, who cares?” she said. “It’s the trip that’s important.” (96)

Sal interprets the competition for choosing singers as an opportunity to earn money and enjoy leisure time. For his part, the prospect of celebrating his heritage with his family stirs Archibald’s spirit, but the idea of a technological spectacle serving as the medium for this celebration makes Archibald wary of the event; he senses its ability to manipulate his vision of heritage. Soon after Sal leaves, Carver, a violent man from the other side of the mountain, arrives as the guide for a wealthy individual who wishes to buy Archibald’s mare. But the wealthy man does not care if the mare is physically fit or in which kind of conditions it works best. Instead, he is singularly preoccupied with the mare’s ability to breed. This puzzles Archibald until he learns from Carver that the wealthy man wants to use his mare to produce birth control pills. Not only do the pills represent for Archibald a form of unhealthy or unnatural sexual attitudes, but he is also horrified by the notion of colts being slaughtered for personal material gain — a doubly horrific image as it reminds him of his own dead son, who perished with his mother while Archibald was away chopping wood.

This notion of natural, valued work as opposed to unnatural capitalist exploitation is reinforced throughout the story. Carver mentions at one point that Archibald and his twin brother cut wood differently from current methods, taking a methodical, “gardenerlike” approach, whereas the industrial strategy is to “just cut ’em all down. Go in with heavy equipment, tree farmers and loaders and do it all in a day, to hell with tomorrow” (100). Similarly, the eagles that live near Archibald’s home continue to do so because of his refusal to control the environment and

to take only what he needs. Their presence, as Archibald learns from the folklorists, is due in part to less aggressive industry tactics in the area: “they don’t use pesticides or herbicides in the forest industry. . . . If they start, the eagles will be gone. There are hardly any nests anymore in New Brunswick or in Maine” (103). The landscape in New Brunswick and its US cousin has been chemically manipulated for industrial purposes, resulting in dire consequences for species such as the bald eagle.

Such tensions between culture and industry find full voice when MacLeod focuses his fictional lens on the central conflict of the story: Archibald’s clash with the pending television program and its consumer-driven producer. At the outset of their meetings, the producer makes it clear that he has little interest in the “meanings” of the songs that Archibald’s family is prepared to sing: “Look, I really don’t understand your language so we’re here mainly to look for effect. We’d like you to be ready with three songs. And then maybe we’ll have to cut it back to two” (107). When Archibald tries to sing, the producer continually cuts him off, asking him to sing different songs in short spans of time. Eventually, he becomes frustrated by what he sees as the producer’s disrespect for his heritage narrative:

“Okay,” said the producer. “Let’s go.” But when they were halfway through, he said, “Cut, okay, that’s enough.” “It’s not finished,” said Archibald. “It’s a narrative.” “That’s enough,” said the producer. “You can’t cut them like that,” said Archibald, “if you do, they don’t make any sense.”

“Look, they don’t make any sense to me, anyway,” said the producer. “I told you I don’t understand the language. We’re just trying to gauge audience impact.” (108)

Unlike Archibald’s dedication to the songs and to preserving his cultural heritage, the producer is concerned only for “effect” and for “gaug[ing] audience impact,” a notion reinforced later on when he dismisses Carver’s group as possible winners because they do not convey the right image of “mining culture”:

“The problem with that group is the way they look.” “The way they look?” said Archibald. “Shouldn’t it be the way they sing?”

“Not really,” said the producer. “See, these performances have a high degree of *visibility*. You’re going to be on stage for four nights and the various television networks are all going to be there. This is,

in total, *a big show*. It's not a regional show. It will be national and international. . . . We want people who *look right* and who'll give a good impression of the area and the province." (109-10)

The producer has little concern for quality, length, or faithful representations of culture. Instead, he has an eye for stereotypes and effect, and wants the audience to receive "a good impression of the area and the province." Hence, the television production is not about accurate depictions of heritage: it is about marketing and selling attractive images of heritage.

Archibald eventually realizes that he is not being asked to represent his culture: he is being pressured to compromise it and submit to the lure of cultural commodification. Comparatively, Carver is fully prepared to compromise his culture for material gain and thus represents the opposite stance: "Look, we need this trip. We need to get a boat engine and we want to buy a truck. . . . It matters too much to that Archibald and you're all dependent on him. *Us*, we're *adjustable*" (111). But in a dream, Archibald's wife sings to him with "clarity and . . . beauty" (113), reminding him that the value of heritage is unmatched by any industry. Archibald awakens refreshed and notifies the producer that he will not be part of the television program, much to the disdain of younger family members who do not understand the importance of heritage and tradition, and who are interested more in "shopping lists and gathering the phone numbers of long-absent relatives and friends in Halifax" than in performing Gaelic songs (111). To them, the city of Halifax represents escape and exoticism, a chance to catch up with relatives and to enjoy leisure time away from their oppressed community in Cape Breton. For Archibald, it is the city and its modern ways that have become the oppressor.

His decision made, Archibald prepares for a backlash from the younger generation. But MacLeod does not see his defence as a single event — he envisions it as part of a greater cultural struggle: "he measured the steps to the stove where the giant poker hung. . . . When he swung it in his hand its weight seemed like an ancient sword" (115). This notion of a Scottish cause, implied by the romantic reference to "an ancient sword," is reinforced by the arrival of Carver and his group at Archibald's home and his interpretation of their gift of liquor. As they brought the bottles in, Archibald "imagined it was men like they who had given, in their recklessness, all they could think of in that confused

and stormy past. Going with their claymores and the misunderstood language of their war cries to ‘perform’ for the Royal Families of the past” (117). Here MacLeod conflates heritage and history conflate into a single message: Archibald’s refusal to become a cultural commodity is inextricably linked to the historical struggle of the Scots, who suffered indignation for generations at the hands of those more powerful than they. Moreover, Carver’s repeated phrase “We know” suggests not only recognition of Archibald’s loyalty to heritage but also their guilt in having compromised their culture for commodity. As Ken MacKinnon notes, “[the younger generation] is maturing in a time when their Celtic culture has finally drawn the attention of the larger society and they are only beginning to ‘really know’ (as Carver says at the end) the degree to which they have been co-opted into the strip-mining and marketing of that culture by crude hucksters who totally lack a conscience about the past.” Moreover, Carver’s use of the phrase “really know” demonstrates his acknowledgement that the television program cannot offer “real” culture to its viewers because it is a vehicle for consumption, not contemplation. Indeed, as Jean Baudrillard has argued, modern technological mediums such as television have succeeded in removing any reference to the “real” through their “continual procedure of directed interrogation” (115) — that is, the viewer of a program has no ability to contemplate the contents, only to judge them: “the images fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous response, yes or no. . . . Film [or television] no longer allows you to question. It questions you, and directly” (119). In its rhetorical echo of Baudrillard, the phrase “really know” captures the heart of MacLeod’s argument: heritage spectacles are incapable of producing “authentic” visions of culture because they can only produce “simulations” of heritage.

Sheldon Currie’s “The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum” and Alistair MacLeod’s “The Tuning of Perfection” confront state-run industries that seek to undermine the region’s Scottish roots. Yet despite their use of similar narrative elements to illustrate such themes of protest, both authors approach the heritage issue of state interference using markedly different textual strategies. Currie, for instance, chooses the permanent fixture of a museum as both the instigative symbol of the state’s corruption of heritage and the commemorative symbol of the MacNeil clan’s struggle for heritage identity. But he also presents read-

ers with two distinct yet interrelated binaries: the first is Neil's Scottish traditions versus the company's sense of industrial progress; the second consists of Margaret's museum versus the real heritage site, the Cape Breton Miners' Museum. In contrast, MacLeod selects a single event, the momentary spectacle of a television program, as the site for his fictional battle for supremacy over heritage. Hence, a clearer binary is established in his narrative, since he pits an aging antimodern hero of heritage (Archibald) against the force of progress (the producer) and his weapon of commodification.

Of equal significance are the broader cultural implications that each story brings to the issue of state involvement in heritage identity, since both narratives invariably complicate rather than simplify the question of "authenticity" through their use of nostalgia, a concept that figures largely in forms of heritage representation: "Heritage is often the domain of nostalgia, where past glories are exaggerated, the disease and inequality of working class life mythologised, agricultural life sentimentally preserved" (Hannabuss 357). In the case of Margaret, her museum serves two primary functions, both of which draw on the nostalgic impulse. First, regardless of how one interprets its contents, the museum is a tourist attraction. Thus, Currie's imagined museum does not fully absolve itself of the sins of "staged authenticity" perpetrated by the real Cape Breton Miners' Museum because Margaret participates in similar acts of cultural exclusion through her nostalgic selection of which artifacts to display. Second, the Glace Bay Miners' Museum represents an act of public commemoration by Margaret, not just for her husband but also for her communal past. By displaying Neil's body parts and other belongings alongside objects and references to her father, brothers, and grandfather, she succeeds in creating a multigenerational monument that laments the loss of both family and heritage. But as Creelman has noted, this museum is largely "an act of *personal* resistance and political agency" (*Setting* 212; emphasis added). Thus, Margaret's personal rather than collaborative approach to representing heritage, coupled with her acts of nostalgic artifact selection, leave it questionable that she is offering tourists a more "authentic" vision of Scottish heritage. Of course, the true power of "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" lies not so much in what it represents but in what it confronts: by creating an alternative perspective on mining life, Currie (through Margaret) is challenging

the authenticity of the cultural narrative claimed by heritage sites such as the real Cape Breton Miners' Museum.

A more poignant use of nostalgia is present in "The Tuning of Perfection." Unlike "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum," whose ending is decidedly more tragic and foreboding, MacLeod's story represents a decisive victory for the culture under threat. Archibald's waiting for a backlash that does not happen, coupled with Carver's admission that his motives for wanting to be in the program are self-serving and materialistic, bestows a moral victory on Archibald at the end of the story and reaffirms, through his cultural "David and Goliath" struggle, MacLeod's belief that the state's attempts at commodification can be thwarted. Furthermore, Archibald's antimodernist vision of heritage exemplifies what Creelman has called MacLeod's "overtly nostalgic mood" (*Setting* 142), which he argues is present in many of the later stories and especially in his novel, *No Great Mischief* (1999). But what Archibald does not realize is that in a postmodern society heritage traditions often exist in a symbiotic relationship with the tourism industry. Had he decided to stay in the production, he might have cultivated greater interest in his Gaelic singing and inspired a younger generation of Cape Bretoners to learn his skill. Instead, his decision not to sing for the television production is a pyrrhic victory because he needs younger family members to carry on his cultural traditions; his death will potentially mark the end of the family's heritage memory.

Few regional narratives have followed the heritage preservation structure put forward by Currie and MacLeod. Although some recent fictions, such as MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* and Simone Poirier-Bures's *Candyman* (1994), explore the role that heritage plays in family survival, the majority reexamine the issue of "authenticity" through a direct fictional engagement with history instead of heritage. By re-presenting events and figures from Atlantic-Canadian history, publications such as Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) and *The Navigator of New York* (2002), Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), and to a lesser extent Alan Wilson's *Before the Flood* (1999) and Leo McKay Jr.'s *Twenty-Six* (2003) collectively reassert the importance and relevance of the past to a postmodern audience. Put another way, these texts function as a fictional response to what Roxanne Rimstead calls "the presentism of our current culture," a conflicting social phenomenon "which has resulted in declarations of 'the end of

history' and frequent visits to . . . sites of memory that are nostalgic and discontinuous rather than critical and historicized" (3). Whether the story is about the life of Newfoundland premier Joey Smallwood, the small town of Woodstock, New Brunswick, in the 1960s, or the 1992 Westray Mine disaster in Nova Scotia, in each instance history serves as the grounding force and catalyst for exploring modern sociopolitical tensions in Atlantic Canada. But this current literary shift away from cultural preservation to historical re-examination does not negate the argument put forward by Currie and MacLeod. On the contrary, MacLeod continues to be recognized both nationally and internationally for his championing of Scottish heritage. As for Currie, the 1990s witnessed a resurgence in popularity for his short story. But what originally began as a story of protest against state-sanctioned heritage commodification has emerged as the ultimate success story of cultural production, since "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum" can now be enjoyed as a short story, a stage adaptation by playwright Wendy Lill, a novella, and a Mort Ransen feature film starring Helena Bonham Carter (see *Margaret's Museum*). Currie's message resonates with audiences in all its manifestations more than a generation after its original publication, thus attesting to the importance and staying power of heritage preservation narratives.

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