

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PSYCHE

In Wayne Johnston's 'The Story of Bobby O'Malley' and Alistair MacLeod's 'The Boat' and 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood'

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### Abstract

Just as islands have physical boundaries that mark where they begin and end, so too do people have boundaries that define them—physical, psychological or emotional, and societal. Often these boundaries are shaped in early childhood. How porous these psychological boundaries are can determine how resilient individuals are. Are they adaptable enough to let emotions flow through and around them like the tides? Or are they vulnerable to being flooded by everything life throws at them? Or are they trapped inside an emotional shoreline that does not allow anything in or out? This paper explores the theme of islandness and, in particular, the emotional boundedness that can result from living on an island. It looks at the role family plays in shaping characters in Wayne Johnston's 'The Story of Bobby O'Malley' and Alistair MacLeod's 'The Boat' and 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood', and at how islands imprint themselves on the psyche at an early age—both negatively and positively. This can result in an emotionally bounded personality, or a more porous person who can connect with his or her island and grow up to be more resilient. All are a part of islandness and contribute to the creation of a strong island identity.

### Keywords

Islandness, boundedness, resilience, identity, Newfoundland, Cape Breton Island

### Introduction

*All happy families resemble one another, every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.* (Tolstoy, 1877: 1)

Just as islands have physical boundaries that mark where they begin and end, so too do people have boundaries that define them—physical, psychological or emotional, and societal. The fiction of Alistair MacLeod (from Cape Breton Island, Canada) and Wayne Johnston (from the island of Newfoundland, Canada) is imbued with the theme of emotional boundedness, one of the potential characteristics of islandness. While it is true that stories of human tragedy are the mainstay of literature the world over, with adversity being what psychologists Anthony and Cohler refer to as an "integral part of the human condition to be suffered and endured" (1987: 10); MacLeod's and Johnston's characters, as islanders, are often intensely troubled because of their interactions with their 'island' environment, families and communities. What is it about

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island living that has such a powerful effect on these islanders? And why is emotional boundedness such a significant part of these characters' lives and, thus, such a major theme in these authors' stories and novels?

That these works are so obviously island-placed does much to create a sense of islandness through their narrative, imagery and thematic preoccupations. From the theme of boundedness flow the tropes that have become part of the 'island studies' lexicon, such as vulnerability/resilience, leaving/staying, routes/roots, tradition/modernity, dependency/autonomy, belonging/exile, prison/paradise - states of continuum with which islanders the world over grapple. Other issues include a lack of or limited choice, the importance of ancestry and inheritance, as well as relationships with the environment, the sea and the mainland. Pete Hay writes, "The very boundedness of islands makes them different. Physical boundedness conduces to psychological distinctiveness because it promotes clearer, 'bounded' identities" (2003: 553), and just as ecological and economic stresses are more acute on islands than on mainlands, so are the psychological. Boundedness, he says, "reduces options" (ibid). This 'acuteness' and boundedness, then, suggest an exaggerated and distilled nature of islandness that sharpens the tension, delineates the characters and hones the imagery, making the works distinctive in their utter clarity.

In his essay 'Islandness' David Weale defines islandness as an island community's "mythology, imagination, its very soul [which] has been sculpted and colored by its geographical circumstances", circumstances that include a topographical shoreline as well as a "psychological shoreline that has been internalized in the consciousness of Islanders, and informs every aspect of life" (1991: 82). This psychological shoreline is what contains islanders and sets them apart, delimits and defines them. It is not something of which islanders are necessarily conscious; rather, it is internal, guiding their thoughts and emotions and actions, remaining with them throughout their lives, even when they leave. As John Gillis asserts, "Insularity and connectedness are but two sides of the same coin, their meanings forever entangled" (2004: 147).

As we see in MacLeod's and Johnston's publications, the distilled nature of island living is a central preoccupation. On an island, the scale of life is often smaller, closer together, bounded; there is not as much room, physically or metaphorically, for shades of grey. There is a proximity to life, and death, that prevails from living close to the elements—potency and passion, as well as repression and feelings of imprisonment. Living close to the edge, literally and figuratively, takes its toll. By the same token, these living conditions can serve to create a sense of solidarity and resilience among its inhabitants, where working together to survive brings a certain pride in the accomplishment and, with it, a strengthened identity.

While the influences on island identity can be traced a great distance through family inheritance and over a wide range of social forces, this paper looks at the more immediate influence of the family on island identity that is formed in childhood. Children come to know their island at a young age, through their recognition of, and attachment to, home and through interactions with family—all of which are paramount in shaping their identity, both positively and negatively. Geographer Douglas Porteous writes of the "deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up ... where we have had particularly moving experiences", which become "a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves to the world" (1990: 43). Edward Relph, also a geographer, writes of the importance of that security in giving people a sense of commitment to a

place; a place in the world that resonates as deep within memory as one can possibly go, and then even deeper into the unconscious. It is a place from which people can venture out into the world, and which they can call home: “The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multiplicity of experiences and which call forth an entire complex of affections and responses” (Relph, 1976: 38).

Just as ‘attachment’ and ‘commitment’ to a place are primary reasons that MacLeod and Johnston write about their islands of Cape Breton and Newfoundland, so too do they permeate both authors’ work as they create their fictional island characters. Porteous’s idea that “home tugs throughout our adult lives” (1990: 142–3) is a theme that runs through much of their work. Their characters’ behaviour as adults has been shaped by their childhood attachments to their place, their islands. MacLeod’s characters are compelled to drive 1,700 miles from Northern Ontario to Cape Breton because they are homesick for their island and “couldn’t stand it any longer” (1999: 210–1). Indeed, one of the men gets an erection when he approaches the Canso Causeway (ibid: 116). In reacting to their ‘fields of care’, their bodies act of their own volition, in ways that defy logic. Rather, they are grounded in profound emotion borne of their deep connection to their home islands. And if adults happen to have experienced unhappy relationships as children, coming home might reawaken an even greater complexity of emotions, increasing the intensity of their feelings and the poignancy of their homecoming.

While it may be impossible to separate children’s attachment to a physical place from their associations with that place, the world of family dynamics is a landscape unto itself. Children are affected by family structure and rules, both spoken and unspoken, within the home, and they learn how to negotiate their way through this landscape at a young age by learning what is acceptable and what is not. If a parent reacts with open communication and praise, or consistent and fair punishment, a child will learn stability, which contributes to a child being resilient and healthy. If a child is met with such negative reactions as abuse, threats, irony, sarcasm, spitefulness, cruelty, malicious laughter, or teasing, it can lead to a child being vulnerable and unhealthy. As psychologists Werner and Smith have written in their longitudinal study of children in the Hawaiian island of Kaua’i:

*To the extent that children were able to elicit predominantly positive responses from their environment, they were found to be stress-resistant or “resilient”, even when growing up in chronic poverty with a psychotic parent. To the extent that children elicited negative responses from their environment, they were found to be “vulnerable” even in the absence of biological stress or financial constraints. (1982: 158)*

Consistency is important to children’s development, as they require a reasonable expectation of what their parents’ reactions might be in order to shape their behaviour accordingly. Werner and Smith cite Antonovsky in saying that what is needed is “a sense of coherence, a feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environment is predictable and that things will probably work out as well as can be reasonably expected” (1982: 163). If the parent reacts inconsistently, such as praise one day and abuse the next, or with an intensity that does not suit the behaviour, then the child may be confused, not knowing what will trigger a certain type of reaction. Often alcohol contributes to this inconsistency.

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At the same time, children's own coping mechanisms vary widely, and how children react to their parents' actions can also depend on how 'stress-resistant' or 'resilient' they are. This resilience may be partly a function of the experience of growing up and living on an island, and the attachment to a home that is bounded and offers security. It may also depend on what Anthony and Cohler call their "interpersonal competence," which is "closely associated with a buoyant self-confidence and realistically perceived self-esteem" (1987: 9):

*Important facilitating factors include parental pleasure and interest in the child's growing initiative and autonomy, as well as acquisition of sufficient language to issue commands, offer defiance, and express feelings and engage in play with peers, with roles mutually decided upon. The mutual interplay of interpersonal competence and confidence contributes to feelings of relative invulnerability in the face of difficult or disturbing human relationships. (ibid: 22)*

How children cope with parents' reactions becomes a learned response, imprinted on their psyches at an early age. In several of MacLeod's and Johnston's families, this response becomes the children's *modus operandi* in negotiating their way through the family, from childhood to adolescence to the adults they become. It becomes part of who the children are, part of their island identity. Their reactions run the full spectrum, anywhere from becoming inured to the abuse or suffering a breakdown, to running away or committing suicide. And, often, the patterns continue with the next generation, thus perpetuating the cycle of what can be labelled 'dysfunction', where multilayered obstacles such as poverty, violence, scarcity and absences impede nurturing and successful growth.

In these authors' work we see examples of how children's home environments affect their identity. Stories include absent fathers who have left home in order to support the family, leaving the rest of the family to work out a new dynamic that is disrupted whenever the parent comes home. Children may have to learn new rules every few months. Often the children leave, forced to make a choice between fulfilling their responsibilities at home or leaving to pursue their own dreams and aspirations, a choice that is often ridiculed or despised by those who are left behind.

Sometimes it is a traumatic experience: parental abandonment, violent deaths or suicide are common. In Johnston's and MacLeod's narratives, reaction to trauma runs along a continuum, from insanity or suicide to an emotional boundedness, where a person is unable to express feelings and emotions, such as in the narrator of MacLeod's story, 'The Boat'. In later years this may be perceived as being repression, stoicism or pragmatism—or, as in 'The Boat', insomnia and guilt. It may also have as its outcome violence or abuse, or it may be exacerbated by alcohol. In a few cases, the characters come out the stronger for it, such as Bobby O'Malley, in the eponymous story, or the family structure may be strong and healthy enough to provide a stable environment in which to heal, as is the case for John in 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood'.

### 1. Caught in the crossfire while coming of age in 'The Boat'

Perhaps Alistair MacLeod's best-known short story is his first-published, appearing in *Best American Short Stories* in 1968: 'The Boat' (included in MacLeod, 2000 – to which subsequent page references apply). Set on Cape Breton Island, the story is narrated by

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the youngest and only son in a fishing family and is told from the vantage point of his remembering the pivotal events of his life that have shaped him into the man he is today: a professor in a mid-western university who is wracked with guilt for the choices he has made.

The family seems like a typical Cape Breton fishing family. The father works long hours to support his family in ‘the boat’. The mother comes from a long line of fisherfolk; indeed, some of her brothers fish with her husband in the boat. She is a traditional wife who “ran her house as her brothers ran their boats. Everything was clean and spotless and in order” (5). She toils long and hard, which is the culture of the island: “My mother was of the sea, as were all of her people, and her horizons were the very literal ones she scanned with her dark and fearless eyes” (6). She is stubborn and strong, not to be swayed by change or modernity or people she calls “outsiders” (10).

The man’s earliest memories are of the boat, called the *Jenny Lynn* after his mother’s maiden name. He learns early on the importance of the boat to the survival of his family and how his family’s life revolves around it:

*She seems to be always repairing clothes that were “torn in the boat,” preparing food “to be eaten in the boat” or looking for “the boat” through our kitchen window which faced upon the sea. When my father returned about noon, she would ask, “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” It was the first question I remember asking as a child, “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” “Well, how did things go in the boat today?” (3 - repetition in original)*

The boat is the family’s anchor, and the anchor for the traditional way of life that is his mother’s way of life. Boats are also symbolic of island life, and central to islanders’ survival since boats are often the only way to get off an island or the only means to earning a living. That the boy’s first memories should be of the boat is indicative of the strength of the family’s islandness. For at least his early years, the boy’s reality *is* the boat, and he knows he exists because of the boat: the boat is his identity. As the boy grows older, he spends more and more time on the boat, helping his father and uncle with the fishing.

The story’s tension comes from the relationship between the mother, symbolised by the boat, and the father, symbolised by books. The father’s room is full of books, “a room of disorder and disarray”, and the mother “despised disorder in rooms and in houses and in hours and in lives” (MacLeod, 2000: 8). She does not understand books, not having “read a book since high school. There she had read *Ivanhoe* and considered it a colossal waste of time” (8). She says, “I would like to know how books help anyone to live a life” (10). The children learn about the boat from an early age, but as they grow older they come to discover the books that fill their father’s room, books such as *David Copperfield* and *The Tempest*, “all of those friends I had dearly come to love” (17).

As the boy grows older he becomes more aware of the tension in the household. When the mother catches her daughter reading, she says, “Take your nose out of that trash and come and do your work” (9), and the son sees her slap his sister across the face “so hard that the print of her hand was scarletly emblazoned upon her daughter’s cheek while the broken-spined paperback fluttered uselessly to the floor” (9–10). There are “bitter savage arguments” (11), and once he wonders if his father might kill his mother when she says to him, “Well, I hope you’ll be satisfied when they come home knocked

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up and you'll have had your way" (11). The father "wheel[s] around on one of his rubber-booted heels and look[s] at her with his blue eyes flashing like clearest ice beneath the snow that was his hair" (11). When the boy finally braves coming into the house, both his mother and father suppress their anger by ignoring the son and each other and by pretending that everything is as usual. When the boy asks his father, "Well, how did things go in the boat today?" the father merely responds, "Oh, not too badly, all things considered" (12). The boy is witnessing a disconnect between words and actions but by waiting a few minutes to come into the house, he is instinctively learning to negotiate his way through the emotional 'land mines' set by his parents as their two worlds (a traditional fishing culture versus the modern, educated culture) clash. Eventually the sisters all leave for the city, marrying men whom the mother would never accept because they were not fishermen, and having red-haired children the mother would never see "for they were not of her people and they were not of her sea" (16). Soon the boy is the only one left.

In the winter the boy turns 15, everything changes. At the age of 71, the father "seemed to grow old and ill all at once" (17). The boy knows he must quit school and help with the fishing if the family is going to be able to survive financially, but he recognises that he is going to have to make a choice. He says, "I wished that the two things I loved so dearly did not exclude each other in a manner that was so blunt and so clear" (19). That summer he realises that his father has spent his life trapped: "perhaps my father had never been intended for a fisherman, either physically or mentally" (20). He sees for the first time how his father's skin is irritated by salt water, and he notices the chains he wears on his wrists to keep them from being rubbed raw—chains that have become a metaphor for his life. A photo captures the father's ambivalence toward the ocean, where the "sea was behind him and its immense blue flatness stretched out to touch the arching blueness of the sky... he was so much in the foreground that he seemed too big for it" (15). He learns that his father had really wanted to go to university, but in the end had not done so, presumably because he had not had the chance. At the age of 40 he had married the "local beauty" (5) and had to spend the rest of his life supporting a wife and seven children by fishing with his wife's family. The boy recognises his father's sacrifice:

*I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. And I knew then that I could never leave him alone to suffer the iron-tipped harpoons which my mother would forever hurl into his soul because he was a failure as a husband and a father who had retained none of his own. And I felt that I had been very small in a little secret place within me and that even the completion of high school was for me a silly shallow selfish dream. (21)*

So the son promises: "I would remain with him as long as he lived and we would fish the sea together" (21–2). The father replies, "I hope you will remember what you've said" (22); on the last run of the season, the father lets himself fall over the stern of the boat.

The narrator of 'The Boat' is a young man caught in the crossfire: between his mother and his father, between tradition and modernity, and between choosing to do the right thing and choosing to do the wrong thing—but not knowing what the right thing is. As Janice Kulyk Keefer notes:

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*[T]o leave is to betray a fiercely unforgiving mother; to stay is to reject the only gift it is in a father's power to give—encouragement to feel both the annihilating labour exacted by the sea and the mines, and the kind of marriage in which tenderness and joy become impossible luxuries. One is a traitor whether one goes or stays. (1996: 234)*

His mother symbolises the old ways of keeping alive the traditional family culture of fishing, and is embittered because “no man goes from her house, and she alone of all the Lynns has neither son nor son-in-law who walks toward the boat that will take him to the sea” (MacLeod, 2000: 25). His father represents fulfilling one's destiny, using the gifts one is given. He wants only the best for his children, including his son, which is to avoid the mistake he has made by choosing to marry and to stay. Only by making sure his son does not follow in his footsteps does he know that his life was not a waste, was not lived in vain.

That place between childhood and adulthood is a powerful, impressionable place, one of anxiety and tension. By witnessing his father's death—and knowing the father's sacrifice—it is forever imprinted on the boy. As an adult he is filled with guilt, and awakens in fear at 4am, thinking that he has overslept and that his father and his uncles are waiting impatiently downstairs for him to get up so they can head out to the boat. He gets up and goes to the all-night diner where he sits and smokes and drinks coffee, thinking about what he has done to his mother; thinking that he is not nearly as courageous as his father, yet knowing that his father's suicide would have been in vain if he had stayed. That there was much left of his father is suggested in the closing lines of the story: “There was not much left of my father, *physically*, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair” (25 - emphasis added).

The story, narrated by a guilt-ridden adult, shows the powerful price of this family conflict and trauma. He says, “And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant and the other so untrue” (25). As David Creelman writes, “MacLeod focuses on the lonely trials of isolated individuals who exercise their limited personal freedom to achieve only an incomplete sense of connection with their larger society” (2003: 128). Both father and son have had to make choices, but the ways of the island—its fishing culture and heritage—do not offer many options when it comes to exercising personal freedom. The island, then, has been largely responsible for shaping the identities of both of these men, as well as the mother. Their choices lead them both to places where they feel incomplete: the father to his room to read and the son to the all-night diner. The mother has chosen to stay in her traditional culture rather than accept what her children have become. The choices of the father, and of the mother, are forever etched on the soul of the son.

## 2. Dysfunction in ‘The Story of Bobby O’Malley’

Wayne Johnston's first novel, ‘The Story of Bobby O’Malley’, published in 1985, is written from the perspective of a young adult remembering growing up in the 1960s and early 1970s in a community just outside St. John's in Newfoundland. The book begins with his earliest memories and ends when he leaves home at the age of 16, with a two-sentence reference to “this story [that] goes on past these pages” (190), suggesting that the story has a happier ending than its beginning. The book's back cover describes the book as “exploring how memory is shaped”, weaving Bobby's memories of incidents

with his impressions of those memories, or, as Richard Knowles says, “it concerns itself with the process of memory, dream and narrative, processes through which mind tries to connect with world” (1986: 93). The result is the story of a dysfunctional family that is at once hilarious and heartbreaking, told from the vantage point of the emerging artist who is trying to connect his memories with a world that has been shaped by islandness.

Just as the roots of an unhappy family dynamic in ‘The Boat’ lie in the emotional boundedness of the boy’s parents; the foundation of the O’Malley family’s dysfunction can be found in the emotionally bounded characters of Bobby’s parents, Agnes and Ted. It is a boundedness that stems from their own view of the world on an island and the dynamics of their island community. Agnes is a devout Catholic; indeed, she had planned to become a nun but, for reasons not explained, she changes her mind at the last minute. Having grown up on a small island, Agnes would know the dynamics of island communities where everyone knows everyone else’s business, and that her decision to leave the convent would be an open, but whispered, secret. Similarly, the Church whispers: it is full of “fire and brimstone, the more subtle Catholic kind, not hurled from the pulpit, but whispered” (29). Agnes’s behaviour suggests that she feels great guilt and shame for making this decision, punishing herself by setting herself apart from everything that might bring her joy and anyone who might bring her comfort. When “accused of being beautiful” (23), she deliberately makes herself unattractive, using “harlot-red lipstick” (23), covering her face with powder, and highlighting a “redeeming blackhead or pimple” (23) with an eyebrow pencil. She reeks of perfume, like “a woman under siege, behind a fortress of fragrance. She was like a planet, with an atmosphere all her own” (24) and, according to her husband, she wears a “construction bra” that is “applied to the body very much like a plaster cast” (23) and a girdle that gives her “that steel-belted look” (24). She has an aversion to germs, believing that “the body was a breeding-ground... that we had to keep a proper distance between ourselves and others” and to “imagine ourselves encased in a sterile bubble, and let no-one inside it” (112). She has placed herself, like the island on which she lives, behind a barrier that is virtually impregnable, and does everything within her power to keep the world at bay.

When she cries, Bobby tries to comfort her, but she rebuffs him: “I went over, intending to put my arms around her neck and try to stop the shaking of her shoulders, but, her face bursting red round the edges of her fingers, she jerked her whole body away when I touched her” (19). Bobby says he knows why his mother cries; it is “a sound like sadness coming in, as if through a crack in the house” (53). He describes it as something breaching the barrier she has constructed. She remains trapped inside, crying “like a woman who no longer believed that others could hear her, like one contained by the sound of her own voice” (54). On another occasion, Bobby “in a panic” (33) chases after his crying mother when she abandons him in the dark, slipping and sliding in the slush, trying to give her her purse, finally catching her, and “now that she is again my mother, I begin to cry... The wind gusted, and the cold, sweet smell of perfume wrapped around me like a hug ... ‘We won’t tell your father, will we?’ she said... We began to walk home together, hand in hand, having, for the first time, agreed that some things are best forgotten” (33–34). Bobby has breached the barrier for the moment, likening sweet perfume to a hug, but the mother just as quickly creates another barrier, where she and Bobby are inside it keeping the secret from her husband, who is left on the outside.

From her erratic behaviour and constant crying, Agnes appears to be always on the edge of a breakdown. She enisles herself in the battle against her own demons that have their roots in religion and repressed sexuality. We eventually learn that it is 10



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years before she allows her marriage to be consummated because of what Ted describes as “emotional problems” (168), and even then it is only once, as she is “saying the rosary” (169) on the vertebrae on her husband’s back. This is the night that Bobby is “made” (167). Agnes thinks that all women are “latent nuns” and likens her husband to a habit that nuns wear: “all women are Sisters of Mercy—it’s just that each one wears her habit a different way” (18). Unstable as a mother, she is often not present for her child, or rejects him outright, rarely offering him comfort and not allowing him to offer her any either. Bobby says, “Watching her like that was like touching someone who was fast asleep” (156). This kind of parental abdication or abandonment makes Bobby an orphan in his own family, enisling him too.

The father, Ted, is the TV weatherman, which, on an island, where weather is a force that binds islanders together, should be a job that allows him to be an integral and respected part of island society. However, as Bobby remarks, “In our town my father was both shaman and scapegoat... people seemed to believe that my father not only forecast the weather, but somehow controlled it... Whatever way you looked at it, he was an enemy of the people” (22). Their treatment contributes to his feelings of marginalization and loneliness. Ted has a brilliant sense of humour, but as a parent he is no more effective than his wife. Indeed, he behaves like an adolescent who has never grown up. From the vantage point of adulthood and through the filter of memory, Bobby tries to define his father, saying, “How deceptive language is. Oxford defines ‘father’ as ‘male parent’ and adds the qualification—‘one who deserves filial reverence.’ The word is not quite adequate” (6).

Just as Agnes’s emotional boundedness is caused by cultural factors that stem from living on an island, Ted is affected by an existential loneliness that is sparked by seeing another part of the ocean when he moves from his home on the south coast of Newfoundland to attend Normal School in St. John’s:

*The sun was low, and wind was blowing through the narrows. And it was true, as he’d all his life suspected, that the sea 200 miles from home was different. The water was a different colour, and the wind looked different on it. It was then, he said, he knew he needed company. (189)*

Ted is outside his comfort zone of home and describes where he is in terms of the ocean that surrounds him. He knows that he cannot survive alone beside this different ocean. These lines are similar to those in ‘The Navigator of New York’, where the protagonist Devlin realises, “Nothing so reminds you like the sea that the enemy of life is not death but loneliness” (472). Shortly afterwards Ted meets and marries a vulnerable Agnes who has just left the convent. Bobby laments their relationship: “The thought of a love that great, that relentlessly enduring, made me wonder where the love had gone” (169). Ted attempts to make the marriage work, trying to break down the barriers his wife has built as a devout Catholic by joking and cajoling. But, in the end, as Jeanette Lynes says, “he possesses no real vocabulary to account for his own existence or to articulate his own suffering... Ted’s dark play ultimately points toward nothingness: the meaninglessness that he sees as his life” (1990: 145).

Yet, at the same time, Bobby knows they depend on one another, “needed one another to bring down the dark, as curtains to close upon a window” (53), curtains that will shut out the world and leave them alone. He knows instinctively how barriers can create a safe cocoon, saying:

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*Winter storms have been all things for me. Back then, they brought people together and would not let them go away. They had my mother and father, for a while, live life as I lived it—within walls, safe inside the storm. I loved it when a storm closed in, when the world got smaller and smaller until it seemed our house was all there was. (22)*

But just as islands can be prisons as well as paradise, Bobby recognises the pain and loneliness found within the prison of those barriers:

*the loneliness that must have been there every day like a wall of skin-stripped flesh between them, too raw to touch or even talk about—all that was lost ... They broke the wall down once, and it went back up when I was born. Now it seemed they thought a person was nothing if not alone. How to live in that zone of pain that people close together share, they had no idea. Nor had I. (168)*

He observes his father's way of dealing with the pain: "Until that night, my father had managed to keep himself between hope and hopelessness. He found some neutral middle, some zero from within which he beat back both sides" (Johnston, 1985: 169). He notices the dynamics: "The world was changing. What had been a field of battle between my mother and father was becoming a no-man's land" (53–4).

Bobby reacts to his parents' dysfunction by setting himself apart and turning to books. "Books were worlds [he] could escape to, and [he] read [his] favourites over and over" (116). At school he "clung to [him]self like a piece of driftwood" (57). In high school Bobby surrounds himself with other outcasts, whose primary preoccupations are girls and sex. Their awareness of living on an island is captured in their attitude: "Having a boyfriend on the mainland was about as stuck-up as you could get" (111). Bobby is finally at home in this circle of misfits and creates a new identity.

Bobby must negotiate his way through the land mines of secrecy, some innocent, and some not so—like his father's affair. When Bobby is 16, he witnesses his mother yelling at his father: "'Teddy', she said, 'GROW UP OR GET OUT'" (155). Rather than grow up, Ted chooses to get out: he commits suicide. It is only when Bobby gets drunk after his father's death that he can break free of everyone's expectations, allowing him to get on with his life. A year later, Bobby leaves the island. He says:

*I was surprised to find that, like me, most of the people on the ferry had never been off the island before. Some people were leaving for good, and they were crying ... Those like me, who were only going for a while, should have been able to help themselves ... I heard one of the stewards say, long after the lights of home had disappeared, "The whole boat-load was bawlin' and wavin' like lunatics." (190)*

He cries along with everyone else, but he knows the only way of escaping the dysfunction is by escaping the island:

*A year later, I went away to school. Most importantly, I went away. For often since, the pier at Port aux Basques receding, the land assuming shapes and lines, I've thought that only by leaving did I learn to live here. (190)*

Bobby reduces the island to mere 'shapes and lines' which, by their simplicity and

functionality, make it easier to process the dysfunction. Bobby must literally separate himself from his family and the island before he can build his own sense of self and move on.

From the vantage point of adulthood, Bobby can see the role he has played in his parents' lives: "A thing between two things can join them or keep them apart, can mediate or separate, depending. My father and mother had me between them" (190). He figuratively severs his relationship with his father, purging himself of what Lynes calls "his father's oppressive inventive tyranny" (143) by burning, in the toilet, the videotape of his father's last weather forecast. And he literally severs his relationship with his mother by leaving. He realises that it is only in doing so that he is able to go back, noting that he is friendly when he visits his mother in Kellies: "but that is no ending—more like a beginning, I should think" (190). Despite all that has happened to him, Bobby is smart enough to know that he needs to leave in order to survive. Like Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' (1915), Bobby chooses life over the priesthood. And, because of his artistic sensibilities, he is resilient enough to be able to survive, write the story and return.

Not coincidentally, Wayne Johnston's character Joe Smallwood uses similar words in the novel 'The Colony of Unrequited Dreams': "I tried to convince myself that I was ready to return, that only by leaving had I learned to live here" (Johnston, 1998: 211). This echoes Johnston's own words about his relationship with the island, found in his memoir, 'Baltimore's Mansion': "I can only write about this place when I regard it from a distance" (1999: 236). Only by leaving has Johnston been able to process his relationships with the island and its inhabitants, reducing it to the 'shapes and lines' that eventually become his words and books.

### 3. Functioning in 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood'

In sharp contrast to Bobby O'Malley, MacLeod's character John in the 1976 story 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' (included in Macleod, 2000, to which all subsequent references apply) provides an interesting counterpoint to dysfunction. John has managed to function well in circumstances that, by any measure of tragedy, should have led to an unhealthy family dynamic. Instead of being adversely affected by the circumstances of his life, however, the 11-year-old is thriving in his island setting. This story, set in outport Newfoundland, concerns a 33-year-old folklorist from the mainland who has for the first time come to see his son. Eleven years previously he was a graduate student collecting Newfoundland lore, staying as a guest in a family's house. During this time he has a brief affair with the teenage daughter of the house, Jennifer, who becomes pregnant with John, then he leaves. John and his mother eventually move to Toronto, but she is killed in a car accident when John is back in Newfoundland visiting his grandparents and he ends up staying there.

When the narrator shows up, driving his rented and battered Volkswagen 2,500 miles, the grandparents are fearful that the man will take the boy away. The grandmother, whose "eyes are as grey as the storm scud of the sea" (127) "contain only mild surprise as she first regards me. Then with recognition they glow in open hostility, which in turn subsides and yields to self-control" (128). Presumably the narrator has come to claim his son, but it is not clear whether it is out of guilt or a sense of responsibility, or because he truly longs for him. Still, they allow the narrator into their home, and he gets to know his son. John tells the man about his life at school and his music and fishing.

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“When I was in Toronto,” John told the man, “no one was ever up before seven. I would make my own tea and wait. It was wonderful sad. There were gulls there though, flying over Toronto harbour. We went to see them on two Sundays.” (129) It soon becomes obvious to the narrator that John belongs here in Newfoundland. John’s painfully honest words, “wonderful sad”, show how the island is ingrained on his psyche.

In the end the man does not try to take him. The lost salt gift of blood in the title acknowledges the importance of ancestry, and of the sea that is in the blood. With no small sense of irony, including the definition of ‘successful’, the man says,

*And perhaps now I should go and say, oh son of my summa cum laude loins, come away from the lonely gulls and the silver trout and I will take you to the land of the Tastee Freeze where you may sleep till ten of nine. And I will show you the elevator to the apartment on the sixteenth floor and introduce you to the buzzer system and the yards of the wrought-iron fences where the Doberman pinscher runs silently at night. Or may I offer you the money that is the fruit of my collecting and my most successful life?*  
(139)

This brutally self-ironic tone betrays the narrator’s self-knowledge of how shallow his life is compared with the richness of John’s on the island, by a harbour that is “very small and softly curving, seeming like a tiny, peaceful womb nurturing the life that now lies within it but which originated from without” (119). He witnesses how these people live the kind of life that he can only observe, a fact emphasised by his occupation as a collector of folklore. Theirs is a life in tune with nature and their environment, following the rhythms of the seasons. It is a life lived believing in superstition and portents. It is a life lived with harshness and beauty:

*The grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in 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 rainbow colours.* (118)

His, on the other hand, is lived with the convenience of buzzers and elevators, inside a fence with a dog that keeps people out. He knows he is an outsider: “I attempt three or four more casts and then pass the rod back to the hands where it belongs” (MacLeod, 2000: 123). He acknowledges that this is “[n]o place to be unless barefooted or in rubber boots. Perhaps no place for me at all” (123). He recognises that he is “[m]aking myself perhaps too much at home with this man’s glass and this man’s rum and this man’s house and all the feelings of his love. Even as I did before” (136). He is successful, but he knows that the success has come with a price and he is just learning what the price is: giving up his son.

Before the narrator leaves, the boy gives him a gift of a stone polished by the sea: a metaphor for the child’s life lived in a state of near perfection itself:

*He opens his hand to reveal a smooth round stone. It is of the deepest green, inlaid with veins of darkest ebony. It has been worn and polished by the unrelenting restlessness of the sea, and buffed and burnished by the gravelled sand. All of its inadequacies have been removed, and it glows with the lustre of near perfection.* (MacLeod, 2000: 140)

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The gift of the stone seems ironic at first, as ‘the lost salt gift of blood’ appears to be the gift the man is giving the boy: by leaving him here on the island with his grandparents, the man is giving the boy a gift of life filled with love, with blood, with ancestry. Yet the *boy* is giving the *man* a gift. Because it is given so innocently, unbidden, and from the heart, the gift allows him to acknowledge to himself that he is doing the right thing by leaving the boy there. Like the Celtic knot, the never-ending circle, the gift has come full circle. Writes Arnold Davidson:

*The almost perfect stone from the cold salt shore that the father carries back to the shimmering heartland of the continent sums up, then, the sorrow of his loss even as it also embodies the enduring salt gift of blood, the paternity that demands—an additional gift—it not be acknowledged.*  
(1988: 37)

This act of giving the stone is in sharp contrast with the last scene in the story where the man witnesses a fellow traveller being greeted by his children at the airport with “What did you bring me?” (2000: 142), sharply reminding the reader of the contrast between the child’s natural world and his own commercially artificial one.

Like other MacLeod stories, and, in particular, the novel ‘No Great Mischief’, the grandparents in ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ are raising the child. In much of MacLeod’s writing, grandparents play an important role in nurturing the next generations, either by serving as important role models in the extended family, or by raising the children directly out of necessity because the child’s parents have died or are forced to work away. Beyond what grandparents can give the child—time being among the most precious gifts—grandparents represent a continuity of inheritance that provides succeeding generations with ancestral memory and a sense of rootedness, which are important contributors to a sense of island identity.

Like many of MacLeod’s stories, ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ is an elegy to a way of life that draws upon ancestry and a traditional lifestyle to create a sense of cohesiveness and a strong island identity. The family lives a simpler life where fishing and playing with animals and being closely connected to nature are the characters’ primary activities. The adults are typically stoic and do not talk about their emotions (at least, not without some rum for fortification) but they tell stories and sing the old Gaelic songs as a way of communicating how they feel and to ensure that the grandchildren know their roots and where they have come from. Indeed, as Kulyk Keefer notes, MacLeod “often seems to sing rather than tell his stories... he achieves that haunting and powerful resonance characteristic of the Gaelic music which is his characters’ best means to self-expression and communication” (1996: 182); couching their emotions in old Gaelic songs is also less threatening than talking about them. With more echoes of ‘No Great Mischief’, the lost salt gift of blood in this story is an act of love that gives life, and, as MacLeod says, “All of us are better when we’re loved” (1999: 272, 283).

Conclusion: “...but two sides of the same coin”

An island is defined by its physical boundary: the ocean that surrounds it and the shoreline that demarcates it, serving as a meeting place between land and sea. An island often depends on this boundary to protect it from environmental, political or economic shocks, and the degree to which the island is vulnerable depends on this

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boundary. But, writes island studies scholar Godfrey Baldacchino, “all boundaries are porous... Island studies is very much about the implications of permeable borders” (2007: 5). The boundary opens and closes as required, providing the island with a resilience with which to face the forces that affect it. This resilience, says South Pacific writer Epeli Hau’ofa (1999), works best when one looks at how the ocean keeps islanders bounded while at the same time binding them together and with the rest of the world. He speaks to us of his seafaring ancestors who recognised that “Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but also the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it” (30). The strength of this resilience, then, has an impact on an island’s success with dealing with these forces—from without and from within.

The boundedness that comes with living on an island has a powerful effect on MacLeod’s and Johnston’s characters. If geography is what Yi-Fu Tuan calls “a mirror for man—reflecting and revealing human nature and seeking order and meaning in the experiences that we have of the world” (Tuan in Relph, 1976: 4); then, for many, the island serves as a mirror for those who live there, with the ocean being the defining frame for that mirror. By virtue of being surrounded by water, islanders will experience psychological and emotional boundedness—particularly if, as children, they have been imprinted with similar traits from the adults around them.

MacLeod’s and Johnston’s fiction has been directly affected by their boundedness and their islandness. Their themes are as deep as the Atlantic Ocean that edges their islands. They take their inspiration from all that surrounds them, from their physical landscapes and storied histories to the music of the local dialects. Because of the bounded nature of their geography, their characters’ thoughts and feelings and imaginations and souls have been shaped or imprinted by their islands. Thus islandness underpins how their characters view their island and the world, giving them a distinct island identity.

In contrast to the examples of dysfunction in families such as the O’Malleyes and those in ‘The Boat’, MacLeod’s story ‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’ shows how an integrated personality who receives, as Werner and Smith (1982: 158) say, “predominantly positive responses from their environment” can connect with his or her island and grow up to be more “stress-resistant or ‘resilient’”—important contributors to creating a strong island identity.

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