



VINTAGE

NO GREAT MISCHIEF

ALISTAIR MACLEOD

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1779, driven out of his home, Calum MacDonald sets sail from the Scottish Highlands with his extensive family. After a long, terrible journey he settles his family in 'the land of trees', and eventually they become a separate Nova Scotian clan: red-haired and black-eyed, with its own identity, its own history.

It is the 1980s by the time our narrator, Alexander MacDonald, tells the story of his family, a thrilling and passionate story that intersects with history: with Culloden, where the clans died, and with the 1759 battle at Quebec that was won when General Wolfe sent in the fierce Highlanders because it was 'no great mischief if they fall'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alistair MacLeod was born in 1936 and raised in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. He teaches at the University of Windsor, Ontario.

ALSO BY ALISTAIR MACLEOD

The Lost Salt Gift of Blood
As Birds Bring Forth the Sun

*This book is for Anita, 'mo bhean 's mo ghraidh'.
Appreciation also to our children: Alexander, Lewis,
Kenneth, Marion, Daniel, and Andrew. Not to forget
our lost son Donald.*

ALISTAIR MACLEOD

No Great Mischief

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

As I begin to tell this, it is the golden month of September in southwestern Ontario. In the splendid autumn sunshine the bounty of the land is almost overwhelming, as if it is the manifestation of a poem by Keats. Along Highway 3 the roadside stands are burdened down by baskets of produce and arrangements of plants and flowers. Signs invite you to 'pick your own' and whole families can be seen doing exactly that: stooping and straightening or staggering with overflowing bushel baskets, or standing on ladders that reach into the trees of apple and of pear.

On some of the larger farms much of the picking is done by imported workers; they too, often, in family groups. They do not 'pick your own' but pick instead for wages to take with them when they leave. This land is not their own. Many of them are from the Caribbean and some are Mennonites from Mexico and some are French Canadians from New Brunswick and Quebec.

On the land that has already been picked over, the farmers' tractors move across the darkening fields, ploughing down the old crops while preparing for the new. Flocks of hopeful and appreciative gulls follow raucously behind them.

Once, outside of Leamington, my grandmother, who was visiting at the time, burst into tears at the sight of the rejected and overripe tomatoes which were being ploughed under. She wept for what she called 'an awful waste' and

had almost to be restrained from running into the fields to save the tomatoes from their fate in the approaching furrows. She was fifteen hundred miles from her preserving kettle, and had spent decades of summers and autumns nurturing her few precious plants in rocky soil and in shortened growing seasons. In the fall she would take her few surviving green tomatoes and place and turn them on the windowsills, hoping they might ripen in the weakened sun which slanted through her windowpanes. To her they were precious and rare and hard to come by. The lost and wasted tomatoes which she saw outside of Leamington depressed my grandmother for days. She could not help it, I suppose. Sometimes it is hard to choose or not to choose those things which bother us at the most inappropriate of times.

I think of this now as my car moves along this rich and golden highway on its way to my eventual destination of Toronto. It is a journey which I make on Saturdays, and it is a drive which I begin early in the morning although there really is no reason why it should begin at such an early time. In the fall and in the spring I take the longer but more scenic routes: Highway 2 and Highway 3 and even sometimes Highways 98 or 21. They are meandering and leisurely and there is something almost comforting in passing houses where the dogs still run down to the roadside to bark at the wheels of the passing cars – as if, for them, it were a real event. In the more extreme seasons of summer and winter, there is always the 401. The 401, as most people hearing this will know, is Ontario's major highway and it runs straight and true from the country that is the United States to the border of Quebec, which some might also consider another country. It is a highway built for the maximum movement of people and of goods and it is flat and boring and as efficient as can be. It is a sort of symbol, I suppose, if not of the straight and narrow at least of the very straight or 'the one true way'. You can only join

it at certain places and if your destination is directly upon it, it will move you as neatly as the conveyor belt moves the tomatoes. It will be true to you if you are true to it and you will never, never, ever become lost.

Regardless of the route of entrance, the realisation of the city of Toronto is always something of a surprise. It is almost as if a new set of reflexes must be mastered to accommodate the stop and go of the increased traffic, and more careful thought must be given to the final destination.

In the downtown area along Yonge Street and to the west, the anti-nuclear protestors are walking and carrying their signs. 'One, two, three, four,' they chant, 'we don't want a nuclear war.' 'Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to radiate.' Marching parallel to them and on the opposite side of the street an equally determined group glowers across the strained division. 'Pacifists, Communists Love You', 'If You Don't Think This Country Is Worth Defending, Go Somewhere Else', 'Canada, Love It or Leave It', proclaim their signs.

In the area around Queen Street West which runs between Yonge Street and Spadina Avenue, I begin to look more carefully and to drive more slowly, thinking that I might meet him in the street, almost as if he might be coming to meet me, regardless of the direction of my approach. But today he is not seen, so I manoeuvre my car for a short way through the back alleys with their chained-down garbage cans and occasionally chained-down dogs, and over broken glass which is so crushed and flattened it is now no threat or danger to any tyre. The makeshift fire escapes and back stairways lean haphazardly and awkwardly against their buildings, and from the open doorways and windows a mixture of sounds comes falling down: music and songs from various countries and voices loud on the verge of quarrel and the sounds of yet more breaking glass.

In the autumn sunshine, I lock my car in the afternoon alley and step between walls into the street crowded with bargain shoppers and barking proprietors and seekers of refuse. In the grimy windows hand-lettered cardboard signs offer almost everything, it seems, at less than its true worth.

Between these storefront doors, there are often other doors that the casual person might not notice because they seem so commonplace. They are often painted brown and may or may not have numbers above them, often with one digit missing or hanging crookedly from their nails. When you open these doors, there may or may not be a row of mailboxes, some bearing names stuck on with grey adhesive tape. Almost all of these buildings, though, have a wooden stairway that leads steeply up to a hall lit by a yellow forty-watt bulb, and along this hallway and sometimes along other hallways above it are the people who live above the street-level stores. Contrary to the myth, few of the people who live here are the owners of the stores beneath them. They are, instead, people who do not own much of anything. Generally even their furniture, such as it is, is not their own and when they move, as they often do, they do not look in the Yellow Pages for any selection of moving companies.

Although there are some couples, most of the people are single and most of them are men and most of them are beyond middle age. Sometimes there are whole corridors occupied by men only. They are generally in those buildings where the apartments are very small or consist of a single room. In such corridors there is a small bathroom at one end and it serves all the residents of the floor. It is the kind of bathroom where the lock never works and people who sit on the toilet hold one foot against the door to keep it closed. Sometimes potential users shout at the closed door, 'Is there anybody in there?' much as they might if they were members of a large family in the early rush of pre-

breakfast hours. Inside the bathroom the toilet paper is chained down by an elaborate system of interwoven links, and the dim light bulb is surrounded by a wire cage so it will not be stolen and taken back to one of the rooms. In the old salvaged sink, one of the taps will never shut off properly and there is generally a yellowed stain left by the constant trickle of the running water. Hot water is often scarce, and sometimes on the upper floors it does not exist at all.

Behind the closed doors one can hear vague sounds. The most dominant one is, perhaps, that of men coughing and spitting. Almost all of the men smoke quite heavily, some of them rolling their own cigarettes, sitting in their underwear on the edges of their beds. There is also the sound of radios and of the very tiny portable television sets which sit on tables or on top of the nearly empty refrigerators. Few of the people eat very much. Many of the rooms do not contain stoves, or ones with workable ovens. Tomato soup is heated on top of hot plates and filled with crackers. The smell of burnt toast is often present, and sometimes jars of instant coffee or boxes of tea bags sit on windowsills or on archaic radiators beside packages of purchased cookies so laced with preservatives that they may sit there for months without any signs of change.

It is into such a doorway that I turn now, leaving the sun behind me on the street. And it is such a stairway that I climb, towards the hallway above. This is the third time that he has lived at this address in recent years, circling back and making agreements with the landlord for whom he, at one time, did some work as a handyman. The landlord nearly always takes him back because he is reasonably dependable, and they have at least a few years of some sort of shared past. The landlord, who sells wine in brown paper bags to his tenants, has his own share of problems, which he is quite willing to share with anyone who will listen. It is not easy, he says, having tenants who

move in the night without paying their rent; or who steal and sell some of the furniture he and his wife have provided; or who make duplicate keys to lend to their friends. It is not easy, he says, having the police call him at home in the evenings, when he is watching television, to report disturbances; and it is not easy for him when people stab one another with kitchen knives in quarrels over their wine; or when they are found dead in their urine-soaked beds, strangled and choked on strands of their own vomit, and he does not know any next of kin to contact. Generally, he says, the bodies are 'given to science'. 'But,' he adds, 'that's the good thing about you. I always know who to contact - just in case.' He is a short, portly man who has prospered greatly since coming from Europe as a child. He is proud of his children, who have all gone to university and who smile with perfect teeth from their pictures in his wallet.

As I move down the hallway, I am troubled, as always, by the fear of what I might find. If my knock is unanswered and if the door is locked, I will listen with my ear close to the keyhole for the sound of his uneven breathing. If I do not hear that, I will go back to the street and the neighbourhood and visit the taverns where the draught beer glasses sit in sloppy unwiped puddles which drip onto the floor and where the men have trouble zipping up their trousers as they weave erratically out of the washrooms.

But today when I knock, his voice says almost immediately, 'Come in.'

'The door's locked,' I say, after trying it.

'Oh, just a minute,' he says. 'Just a minute.' There is the sound of three unsteady steps and then a tremendous crash, followed by a silence.

'Are you all right?' I ask.

'Oh yes,' comes the answer, 'just a minute. I'll be right there.'

The lock is turned and the door is opened, and as I enter, he is standing there, holding on to the doorknob for support with both of his huge hands, swaying sideways as the door moves inward and towards him. He is in his stocking feet, and his brown work pants are held up by a broad brown leather belt. He wears no outer shirt other than the white, now yellowed, woollen underwear which he wears during all seasons.

'Ah,' he says, speaking in a mixture of English and Gaelic. 'Ah, *'ille bhig ruaidh*, you've come at last.' He steps backwards, pulling the door towards him and still clutching its knob for support. There is a gash above his left eyebrow, caused, it seems, from the crashing fall against the steel frame which protrudes beyond the mattress at the foot of his bed. The blood flows down his face beneath his ear, and then under his chin and down his neck until it vanishes into the hair on his chest beneath his underwear. It does not drip on the floor, although one almost expects to see it, eventually, perhaps emerging beneath the cuffs of his trouser legs. But for now it seems to follow the contours of his face, as the mountain river follows the land before falling into the sea.

'Did you hurt yourself?' I say, looking around for something such as Kleenex to staunch the flow.

'No,' he says. 'What do you mean?' and then following the direction of my gaze he takes his left hand from the doorknob and touches his cheek. He looks at the blood on his fingertips with surprise. 'No,' he says. 'It is nothing, just a scratch.'

He relinquishes the doorknob completely and staggers backwards until he falls in a jangling sitting position upon the protesting springs of the unmade bed. When his hands are removed from the doorknob they shake violently; but now, sitting on the edge of the bed, he places them on either side of him and holds the bedframe's steel. He hangs

on to it fiercely, until his huge and broken knuckles whiten, and then finally his trembling hands are stilled.

‘As long as I have something to hang on to,’ he says, swaying back and forth, ‘I am okay.’

I look around the small familiar room and its spartan neatness. There is no evidence that he has eaten today and there does not seem to be any food visible. In a wastebasket beside the sink, there is one of those amber bottles in which oversweet and low-priced wine is sold. It is empty.

‘Do you want anything to eat?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he says, then after a pause, ‘nothing to eat.’ He emphasises the last word and smiles. His eyes are as dark as my own, and his hair, which was black, is now a rich, luxurious white. It is the only thing about him that has continued to flourish, rising above his forehead in succeeding waves and, because it is untrimmed, now extending over his ears and too far down his neck. It is almost a sign, as is the case with so many men who eat too little and drink too much. Almost as if the alcohol were a mysterious kind of plant food, causing the topmost leaves to flourish while the plant itself grows numb.

He looks at me expectantly, smiling in the old affectionate way. ‘My cheque does not come until Monday,’ he says.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I’m going out to the car. I’ll be right back.’

‘All right,’ he says. ‘Leave the door open.’

I go out into the hall and past the quiet closed doors and down the stairway into the street. The sun is shining brightly, which is almost a surprise, after the dimly lit interior. I pass through the space between the buildings to my car. Opening the trunk, I take out the bottle of brandy which I have purchased the night before in case of these exact circumstances. Brandy always works the fastest. I put it inside my sports coat and press it tightly against my ribs with my left arm and then retrace my route. The door is

ajar and he is still sitting on the bed's edge, hanging on to control his shaking hands.

'There is a shot glass in the cupboard,' he says as I take out the brandy bottle. I go to the cupboard to look for the shot glass. It is easy to find as there is not much else. It is a souvenir of Cape Breton with an outline of the island on it and some of the place names. It is a gift to him from my children, purchased as part of a bar set two summers ago. 'Uncle Calum will like this,' they said, being too young to intend anything as sophisticated as irony.

I pour the brandy into the shot glass and walk across to the bed to offer it to him. He removes his right hand from the bed and grasps the glass, but it flies out of his hand immediately, bouncing against my thigh and falling to the floor. It does not break, and now I can see and feel the stain of the brandy as it spreads its dark outline on the left leg of my trousers. He replaces his hand quickly on the bed, as if it has been burned.

The mug without the handle does not work any better, although he is able to grasp it with both hands for a moment before the contents spill on his own crotch and between his legs to seep into his bed. I go a third time to the cupboard and get a plastic bowl, the unbreakable kind that mothers buy for babies in high chairs. I splash some of the brandy into the bottom of the bowl and take it to him. He places both of his huge hands beneath it and raises it to his lips while I continue to steady the rim that is closest to me. He makes slurping sounds as he tilts his head back and the brandy gurgles down his throat. Because he has tipped the bowl too far some of the brandy spills along the outside of his face and runs down his chin to mingle with the blood still flowing from the gash. I splash some more brandy into the bowl and give it to him. Almost immediately it begins to take effect. The shaking of his hands becomes less agitated as his dark eyes become more clear. Like the patient who

receives the anaesthetic, his fear and trembling are reduced.

'Ah, *'ille bhig ruaidh,*' he says. 'We have come a long way, you and I, and there are no hard feelings. Do you remember Christy?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Of course I remember Christy.'

'Ah, poor Christy. How she always kept her part of the bargain.' He pauses and then changes the subject. 'I have been thinking the last few days of *Calum Ruadh,*' he says with an almost apologetic shrug.

'Oh yes,' I say.

'He was our great-great-great-grandfather, right?'

'Yes, he was.'

'Ah yes,' he says. 'I wonder what he looked like.'

'I don't know,' I say, 'other than that he was supposed to be big and of course *ruadh*, red. He probably looked like the rest of us.'

'Like you, maybe,' he says.

'Well, you're big,' I smile, 'and you have Calum, his name.'

'Yes, I have his name, but you have his colour.' He pauses. 'I wonder if his grave is still there?'

'Yes, but it is very near to the cliff's edge now. The point of land is wearing away. Some years faster than others, depending on the storms.'

'Yes, I imagine so,' he says. 'It was always so stormy there. It is almost as if his grave is moving out to sea, isn't it?'

'Yes, I guess that's one way of looking at it. Or the sea coming in to meet him. But the big boulder with his inscription on it is still there. We had the letters rechiselled and then painted them in with a new marine waterproof paint. They will last for a while.'

'Yes, for a while. Although they'll eventually wear away too, and someone will have to recut them again - like

before.' He pauses. 'It is as if with the passing of time he moves deeper into the rock.'

'Yes,' I say.

'Deeper into the rock before he falls into the sea, perhaps? Do you remember how when the gales would blow, the spray from the sea would drench the boulder until it glistened?'

'Yes.'

'And when the boulder was wet you could see the letters more clearly?'

'Yes,' I say. 'That's right. You could.'

'Yes, more clearly in the storm than in fair weather. I have been thinking of that now, although I can't remember if I ever thought about it then.'

He gets up from the bed and retrieves the mug without the handle from the floor. He is steadier now, and his hands no longer tremble. He takes the brandy bottle and sloshes some of the contents into the mug which a few moments ago he was unable to control. He is rising out of one state into another. Next he will achieve a kind of plateau where he will level off for perhaps an hour and then, depending on how much more alcohol he consumes, he will begin to go down what seems like the other side of the mountain. The late afternoon and early evening may or may not see him spitting blood or swaying in the shadows as he attempts to urinate in the sink, fumbling at the front of his trousers with his right hand while supporting himself with his left against the wall. And I will have to leave him then, to follow my headlights through the city and then back down the highway. Each of us repeating his own small history.

'Didn't I mention this to you the last time you were here?' he asks, breaking my thoughts and returning to the subject of *Calum Ruadh* and his gravestone.

'No,' I say at first, hoping to save him embarrassment, and then, 'Yes, yes you did.'

'Ah yes,' he says, '*'ille bhig ruaidh*. Will you have a drink? Have a drink with me?' He offers me my own brandy.

'No,' I say. 'No, I don't think so. I'd rather not. I have a long drive ahead of me. I have to go back.'

'Ah yes, you have to go back.' He gets up, still holding the brandy bottle, and walks to the window which looks out on the back alley, on the erratic fire escapes and the resting garbage and the ground-down glass.

'It is a nice day out there,' he says, as if looking at another country. 'A nice September day. The blackfish are jumping off the *Calum Ruadh's* Point. I can see them: the way they shine, so black and glistening. But they had better not come in too close. Do you remember the one who came to shore?'

'Yes, I remember him.'

'And how we hoped that the storm would take him back out, but it didn't.'

'Yes, he couldn't get back out.'

'No,' he says, turning from the window, 'he couldn't. Do you remember our parents?'

'I'm not sure,' I say. 'Some things. I'm not sure how many of the memories are real and how many I've sort of made up from other people's stories.'

'Ah yes,' he says. 'And your sister, Catriona, the same.'

'Yes,' I say. 'The same.'

He drinks again. This time directly from the bottle, which is now emptying rapidly.

'Poor Grandma and Grandpa,' he says. 'They were good to you. As good as they knew how.'

'Yes,' I say. 'They were.'

' "Always look after your own blood," Grandma said.' His mood changes in an instant and he seems suddenly angry and suspicious. 'I suppose that's why you're here?'

I am caught off guard by the sudden shift, trapped in the net of my own guilt and history.

‘No,’ I say. ‘Why no. Not really. No, it’s not that way at all.’

I look towards him, trying to gauge his mood as he sways slightly on the balls of his stocking feet before me. The golden September sunshine slants indirectly through the window behind his back and seems to silhouette him as the dust motes flicker in its beams. He appears like the actor in the spotlight of the afternoon performance. He is poised and potentially dangerous, and in spite of all the years of abuse, his body still responds to the old tense signals. He rocks forward now on his toes and then backwards on his heels while holding the brandy bottle lightly in his left hand, as if he might throw it. The fingers of his right hand open and close slowly and rhythmically; now into a fist and now into an extended hand. Then he laughs and the moment is past.

‘Ah yes,’ he says. ‘Yes, *’ille bhig ruaidh*. I was only thinking. Go and get some more liquor. Brandy if you want, or wine or beer, and we will drink away the day together. And the night.’

‘All right,’ I say, stepping towards the door, perhaps too quickly, and feeling ashamed for seeming so eager to abandon the room I have driven so many miles to enter.

‘What would you like? Beer? Wine?’

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘It doesn’t make much difference. It doesn’t make much difference.’

‘Okay, I won’t be too long.’

‘No big rush,’ he says. ‘Take your time. I am not going anywhere and I have this.’ He swings the amber brandy bottle and its contents back and forth in his left hand. ‘I will sit here and wait.’

I go out into the hallway and close the door behind me and then slump with temporary relief. It is the slump of students when they close the door of the examination room behind them, or of those who leave the dentist’s office after being told, ‘The fillings will be two weeks from today – but

not today.’ Or of the witness released from his cross-examination in the box.

As I stand in the hallway I hear him as he begins to sing on the other side of the door. He sings softly but resolutely – singing to himself in the manner that the drunken or the near-drunken often use to communicate with themselves:

*‘Chi mi bhuam, fada bhuam,
Chi mi bhuam, ri muir lain;
Chi mi Ceap Breatuinn mo luaidh
Fada bhuam thar an t-sail.’*

He is singing ‘*Cumha Ceap Breatuinn*’, ‘Lament for Cape Breton’, which is one of those communal songs often sung by large groups of people or in situations where one person sings the verse and the group sings the chorus. It means something like:

I see far, far away.
I see far o’er the tide;
I see Cape Breton, my love,
Far away o’er the sea.

As I walk down the hallway I move out of earshot of the singer who recedes with each of my steps, but as I begin to descend the steep, sad stairs, beneath the forty-watt bulb, the song continues and I am almost surprised to realise it is no longer coming from him but from somewhere deep within me. It rises up to the extent that my own lips move in an almost reflex action:

*‘Gu bheil togradh ann am intinn
Bhi leibh mar a bha
Ged tha fios agam us cinnt*

Ribh nach till mi gu brath.'

There's a longing in my heart now
To be where I was
Though I know that it's quite sure
I never shall return.

It is as if there is no break between his ending and my beginning; although the subject matter is much different, the verses and chorus come easily to my mind in the way, I suppose, that middle-aged former boy scouts remember the verses of 'She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain' and 'Oh, My Darling Clementine'. Sounds planted and dormant and flowering at the most unexpected times.

I am a twentieth-century man, I think, as I step out on to the street. And then another phrase of my grandmother's comes to mind, '*whether I like it or not*'. I am a middle-aged man this September and indeed there is not much of the twentieth century left. If I continue to journey towards its end I will be fifty-five when the century closes, which is either young or old, perhaps, depending on your own point of view and attitude towards age and time. 'We will live a long, long time,' said my grandfather of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, 'if we are given the chance - and if we want to.' I try to square my shoulders in the September sun - as if I were auditioning for the part of 'twentieth-century man' in a soon-to-be-released spectacular. 'Ah,' haunts the voice of my oldest brother, 'ah, *'ille bhig ruaidh*. You've come at last. We have come a long way, you and I, and there are no hard feelings.' The voice pauses. 'I have been thinking the last few days of *Calum Ruadh*. I wonder what he looked like?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'I don't know. Only what I have been told.'

‘Ah,’ says the voice. ‘Stay with me. Stay with me. You are still the *gille beag ruadh*.’

Still the *GILLE beag ruadh*. The phrase means ‘the little red boy’ or ‘the little red-haired boy’ and it was applied to me as far back as my memory goes. I remember thinking of it as my name and responding to it rather than to ‘Alexander’, which is what is on my birth certificate. And even on the first day of primary school, sitting behind my twin sister in my new clothes and clutching my newly purchased crayons in my too clean but sweating hands, I failed to respond when my true name was called from the roll.

‘That’s you,’ said a cousin, poking me from across the aisle.

‘Who?’ I said.

‘That’s you,’ he said. ‘That’s your name.’

Then, taking matters into his own control, he raised his hand and, pointing towards me, said directly to the teacher, ‘That’s him, *gille beag ruadh*, Alexander.’

Everyone laughed because I had missed my own name and the teacher, who was not from the area, became very flushed, probably because of the Gaelic phrase she did not understand. Thankfully, however, we were of the generation who were no longer beaten because we uttered Gaelic, ‘beaten for your own good,’ as the phrase seemed to go, ‘so you will learn English and become good Canadian citizens’. Instead she merely asked, ‘Is your name Alexander?’

‘Yes,’ I said, having regained some shreds of composure.

‘In the future, please answer when your name is called from the roll,’ she said.

‘I will,’ I said to myself, making a sharp mental note to be on the lookout for the foreign sound in the future.

And also at that first recess, several bigger boys approached me, and one said, ‘Are you *gille beag ruadh*?’

‘Yes,’ I said, at first responding from habit and then, remembering my most recent lesson, ‘no, I’m not. Alexander. I’m Alexander.’

However, it seemed to make no difference: ‘The *Calum Ruadh*’s hair is red. It sets fire to their bed,’ he chanted.

Again, under attack, I felt my lower lip trembling and I was afraid that I might cry.

‘Leave him alone,’ said another bigger boy in the group. ‘You’re part *Calum Ruadh* yourself,’ and he ruffled my hair as he led the group away. I ran to join my sister, who was waiting for me a few yards away, and we went to play on the slides, which we had been told was a good thing to do at recess.

The *Calum Ruadh* who seems so present in thought and conversation in today’s Toronto was, as I mentioned earlier, my great-great-great-grandfather. And he came from Scotland’s Moidart to the New World in 1779. Sometimes it seems we know a lot about him, and at other times very little. ‘It is all relative,’ as they say. No pun intended. There are some facts and perhaps some fantasies that change with our own perceptions and interests.

These seem the facts: He was married in Moidart to Anne MacPherson, and they had six children, three boys and three girls. While these children were still quite small, Anne MacPherson became ill and died ‘of the fever’, leaving him with what my grandparents referred to as ‘his care’, meaning his motherless children. Later, his wife’s younger sister, Catherine MacPherson, came to keep house for him and to look after her nieces and nephews and eventually to marry the man who was their father. They had

six more children, again three boys and three girls. Anyone who knows the history of Scotland, particularly that of the Highlands and the Western Isles in the period around 1779, is not hard-pressed to understand the reasons for their leaving.

They already had friends and relatives in North America. Many of them were in the Cape Fear River area of North Carolina – nearly all of them men, fighting at the time in the American War of Independence. Some of the older ones were on the side of the revolutionaries because they had decided to fight for a new life in the New World, and others fought on the British side because they remained stubbornly loyal to the British cause. At night they sang Gaelic songs to one another across the mountain meadows where they would fight on the following day. Singing Gaelic to their Highland friends and relatives across the glens of North Carolina: ‘Come on over and join us.’ ‘You’re on the wrong side.’ ‘Don’t be fools.’ ‘The future is with us.’

Calum Ruadh was fifty-five in 1779 and had been twenty-one ‘at the time of the Forty-Five’ when the call had gone out to ‘rise and follow Charlie’. Again there were friends and relatives singing and saying to one another: ‘Don’t be fools.’ ‘You’re on the wrong side.’ ‘Your loyalty is misplaced.’ ‘Think about it.’ Pressures from above as well as from all sides.

He and his wife and family had apparently talked about leaving for some time, and had made their plans quietly and contacted the emigration agent and agreed to meet him and his ship in one of the sheltered coves along the coastline, where he was picking up families such as theirs. Bound for Nova Scotia, ‘the land of trees’, although *Calum Ruadh*’s destination was Cape Breton, where, he had been told in a Gaelic letter, there would be land for him if he would come.

They were to leave on August 1, and the crossing would be perhaps six weeks with favourable winds. But in the

weeks prior to the departure, the former Catherine MacPherson became ill and they did not know what to do. In the end they decided to go, having sold their cattle and given up the precious end timbers to their house, which in that land and in that time were hard to come by. Ironically, leaving a land with too few trees for one that was to have, perhaps, too many. They came down to the shore and waited, *Calum Ruadh* and his ill but hopeful wife and his twelve children. His eldest daughter was already married to a man named Angus Kennedy from the Isle of Canna and they waited also. One sees them in imagination's mist, shuffling their feet and watching the horizon while the shapes of friends and relatives move in and out of the shadows. 'Perhaps you're making a mistake.' 'You could be fools.' 'The future is uncertain.'

They waited there, *Calum Ruadh* holding his violin and perhaps resting his foot on the wooden sea chest with its neatly divided compartments. All of them with some small provisions and with their money secreted inside their shoes. He was unaware that the French Revolution was coming and that a boy named Napoleon was but ten, and had not yet set out to conquer the world. Although he was not surprised, later, at the number of his own relatives who died before and during Waterloo, still shouting Gaelic war cries while fighting for the British against the resistant French. General James Wolfe, whom he perhaps did not remember from the Forty-Five, was already dead twenty years, dying with the Highlanders on the Plains of Abraham – the same Highlanders he had tried to exterminate some fourteen years before.

It is unlikely that *Calum Ruadh* had many thoughts of Wolfe in that August of 1779. His mind was likely filled with more immediate concerns as he prepared to leave Moidart – another MacDonald leaving Moidart yet again – although this time not to 'rise and follow Charlie', although that