"The Tangled Twisted Strands of Love" in Alistair MacLeod's
"As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories"

It is "Difficult to be ever certain in our judgements or to fully see or understand. Difficult to see and understand the twisted strands within the rope. And forever difficult to see and understand the tangled twisted strands of love." By his use of a rope metaphor, MacLeod provides his readers with a meta-fictive clue as to how we should read his stories. And though our vision may be as partial as his narrators and our understanding just as incomplete, MacLeod asks that we follow the twisting strands to where they might lead us. The rope metaphor, of course, suggests a tool-in-trade for a maritime culture, but also more importantly, it suggests the serpentine intricacy of Celtic art.

The labyrinthine rope makes an apt metaphor indeed for a collection of stories that celebrates its Gaelic heritage. Bounded by a maritime culture, the tales, evocative of an oral tradition, look backwards to the Highland Clearances of Scotland, and ponder also the nature of entrapment and escape in twentieth century Cape Breton.

The tales draw attention to presences built upon absences, and we hear faint echoes of the Gaelic way of speaking once transported to Canada by Scottish settlers and now in danger of being lost. Throughout these stories that root themselves in farming, mining and fishing traditions, strands of loss and love weave their way. The tales though crafted "with sophisticated narrative techniques," says Holley Rubinsky, "aim for the heart and hang on."
But Rubinsky cautions us, we need patience to read MacLeod. His stories are not, she says, "decadent, new-age, minimalist or postmodern" (27). She poses the question of how, under the weight of current critical literary theory, does one choose a methodology to review ABBF?

It would seem that MacLeod's way of using the oral tradition for his own literary purposes answers that question. He tells us how to "read" the stories. His unsentimental respect for his characters and their stories seems to demand the same kind of response from a critic. These tales communicating as they do at a level of intuitive ancestral memory ask for terms of reference other than such literary concepts as "aporiatic moments," "gaps," and "fissures." 5

Which is not to say that MacLeod's stories offer us any assurance or certitude. What he does offer, as we trace the tangled strands of love in his stories, is an intimation of enduring heroic qualities that transcend human imperfections and refuse to divest themselves of meaning.

The way MacLeod pays tribute to the heroic and often tragic quality of the characters who people ABBF calls to mind Arthur Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man." "Heroic action," Miller says, "is not the exclusive right of the socially highly-placed." And the "tragic flaw" is not necessarily a weakness. "The flaw," he says..."is really nothing, but [the tragic hero's] inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity." 6 We have only to think of "Tuning to Perfection" and Archibald resisting the prevailing tide of public taste to know that we are in the presence of a tragic hero.

Archibald exemplifies caring. He cares too much to compromise the purity of the Gaelic songs which he once sang with his beloved dead wife. In the Afterward to ABBF, Jane Urquhart notes that throughout the stories we witness such a deepness of caring "that binds man to woman, father to son, man to animal, and humanity to kin and landscape" (172). MacLeod,
she says, articulates an "emotional truth." It is this "felt" truth that permeates the stories and binds the reader as men, big both physically and spiritually, grapple with such large challenges as exile, entrapment and escape, integrity, loss, grief, memory and perception, belonging and alienation, sex and death.

Which is not to say that MacLeod’s women characters are weakly depicted. On the contrary, Archibald’s wife in “Tuning,” as she works alongside him, and also the wilful blind grandmother in “Vision,” who retains her sexual passion in the face of church and community sanction, are both strongly drawn. However, the women are the ones who cope, and it is men like Mackinnon in “The Closing Down of Summer” who dream and try to articulate existential concerns.

MacLeod, in an interview with Colin Nicholson, tells how he came to create Mackinnon, the miner. “I was interested,” he says, “in the problem of the intelligent, reflective, inarticulate person, someone who thinks a lot.” MacLeod couples Mackinnon’s introspection with a passionate physicality. In “The Closing Down of Summer,” Mackinnon likens his men to athletes and sees them as “huge and physical...polished and eloquent in the propelling of their bodies towards their desired goals and in their relationships and dependencies on each other” (24). Love and inter-dependence hold together this group of itinerant hard-rock miners who have become strangers around their own hearths. Together this bonded fraternity speak Gaelic to each other and sing the old songs—effecting what MacLeod calls a “prelapsarian return.”

But physicality is never far away in “Closing.” On just two pages of the story Mackinnon ponders the nature of his life, and his diction ranges over a whole catalogue of necks, shoulders, bodies, feet, hair, forearms, taut calves, legs, skin, fingers, eyes, ears, heels, ankles, knuckles, nails and the inevitable scars (9-10). For mutilation is itself the miner’s badge of office until such a time as he finds himself, like Mackinnon’s brother, smashed underground with his bodily fluids seeping “quietly on to the
glistening rock” (14).

In this “landscape of the heart,” Francis Berces notes that there is a Sisyphean context in which the human spirit is seen striving to affirm its most basic values rather than submitting to the weight of necessity. Again Miller’s words resonate. “I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.”

Personal dignity is repeatedly affirmed in MacLeod’s stories.

“Closing” and “Tuning” are exemplar of the pursuit of integrity as Mackinnon and Archibald struggle to maintain their personal dignity in a changing world. Both stories also act as allegories for those displaced and exiled Scottish souls of two hundred years ago. “Closing” and “Tuning” are in and of themselves the story of Mackinnon and Archibald, but they are also stories of people out of step with their time.

I have chosen to examine “Vision” as my third story because it most overtly exemplifies a Celtic consciousness and also for its meta-fictional quality. Throughout this multi-layered piece the major themes of exile, love, loss, entrapment and escape—the concerns, that is, of this world—are interwoven with the extrasensory perception which accompanies the gift (or curse) of second sight.

In all three stories there is an emphasis on a language that struggles to live and is in danger of becoming obsolete. In “Closing” Mackinnon notes that the miners are unlikely to be replaced in the mine by their own “flesh and bone,” “for such replacements, like our Gaelic, seems to be of the past and now largely over” (22). We see in these three stories human souls trying to understand and articulate the meaning of their tangled and twisted strands of love—whether sexual love, love of family, friends or animals, love of the old language or love of place.

Love in these stories often looks over its shoulder to lost loves—to human loves and past times and past places. In Patterns
of Isolation, John Moss says that the immigrant’s love goes back to lost homelands. “Unlike the United States...,” he says, “newcomers to Canada are neither absolved nor relieved of their part in the worlds they left behind.”

The Welsh have a word for this looking back with longing—hiraeth. Les Murray, Australian-Scottish poet, expresses it this way:

Ancestral, a code of history.
a style of fingering, an echo of vowels
honey that comes to us from the lost world.

MacLeod, in true Celtic tradition, acts as Guardian of the Memory and memorializes the history of Cape Breton and its Scottish heritage. And to paraphrase Robert Kroetsch’s words, he [MacLeod] locates the dislocations of the inheritors of the Highland Clearance diaspora and confronts “the impossible sum of our traditions.”

As part of a Celtic Consciousness, MacLeod salutes the ancestral memories of Cape Bretoners, and gives articulation to what he describes in Speaking for Myself as “the divided inheritance of loss and attachment.” With a lyrical bardic style that recalls centuries of oral story telling, MacLeod “sings” the lament of his Cape Breton characters who are displaced in one way or another. MacLeod laments for Mackinnon who must leave Cape Breton and for Archibald who must stay and fight the expediency adopted by a people who are themselves locked in the throes of economic disaster. As MacLeod tells their stories, the lament becomes an elegiacal echo across time and space for ancestors who over two hundred years ago were forced out of their homes in the infamous Highland Clearances.

David Craig in The Crofters, says the trauma was so severe for the victims of the Clearances that they repressed their sorrow, their humiliation and their suffering. Craig describes how the bailiffs quenched the crofters’ hearth fires with their clean and precious milk:
For all the fires of a township to be quenched—forever—it must have been experienced as a breach in something eternal, a snuffing-out of the life-possibility itself, and to do so with the clean precious milk...linked the obliterations of food and fuel, warmth and nourishment, in a single unholy rite (29).

MacLeod’s narrators act now as the means by which the conscience of their race is not forged but expressed. They remember for those who chose not to remember. Colin Nicholson restates the same thought. MacLeod, he says, “sounds an abiding note of loss and of regret, with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of choric threnody. So there is, co-existing with his lyrical celebration of living, a pervasive sense of sadness, as if the style itself were keening.”

MacLeod, by performing a choric threnody, or choric dirge, articulates for the Scottish settlers the sorrow that was once silenced by too much pain.

This “pervasive sense of sadness,” this sounding the inexpressible for those who did not wail, permeates “The Closing Down of Summer” and sets the tone for the whole collection of stories. At the start of “Closing” we find Mackinnon and a group of hard-rock miners waiting for the weather to change so that they can begin their trek from Cape Breton to Africa. They will re-enact the same kind of economically enforced exodus as their ancestors. And, just as the Scottish exiles festooned their bonnets with sprigs of heather to remind them of their homeland, so Mackinnon notes that the grills of the miner’s large and expensive cars are bedecked with chance bits of Cape Breton spruce (11).

MacLeod uses a traditional setting for Mackinnon’s introspection as he lies on the beach with his gang of miners. The summer is nearly over, and Autumn, the season before the sleep of Winter is nearing. The depiction of nature is every bit as inhospitable as Eliot’s “WasteLand.” All is dry and arid in
“Closing.” “The Gardens have died and the hay has not grown and the surface wells have dried to dampened mud” (7). The trouts that inherit the trickles of mud are “soft and sluggish and gasping for life.” MacLeod juxtaposes aridity with images of rain and mud. All the funereal scenes are mired down with mud.

Who can forget the scene as Mackinnon recalls the grave-diggers opening up the family plot. The grave, weakened with mud, caves in sending the five-year old coffin of Mackinnon’s father crashing into the grave diggers.

We had held it there, braced by our backs in the pouring rain, until the timbers were brought to shore up the new grave’s side and to keep the past dead resting quietly. I had been so frightened then, holding the old dead in the quaking mud so that we might make room for the new in the same narrow cell of sliding earth and cracking wood” (16)

The correspondence between the narrow cell-like grave and the mine is strongly drawn in this scene. Again using the traditional imagery of death and endings, MacLeod has Mackinnon finish his story in the late afternoon. And as the miners travel west into the evening light, a medieval ballad that he had once known at university, comes unbidden into his mind. Mackinnon’s ballad competes with the Gaelic voices in the car, but still the message of mortality persists and has to be acknowledged:

“I wend to death, a king iwiss:
What helpes honour or worlde’s bliss?
Death is to man the final way—
I wende to be clad in clay. (31)

But before death there is still the story to be told. Mackinnon strives to do so but concedes “I have not been able, as the young folks say ‘to tell it like it is,’ and perhaps now I never shall” (30). As Mackinnon tells his tale he self-reflexively recognises the
metamorphosis that stories undergo. Recalling a phone call about the death of a miner, he reflects:

The darkness of the midnight phone call seems somehow to fade with the passing of time, or to change or be recreated like the ballads and folk-tales of the distant past changing with the telling as the tellers of the tales change, as they become different, older, more bitter or more serene (14-15).

Again MacLeod draws our attention to the shape-shifting nature of stories that attempt to contain emotions—emotions too searing to be kept enshrined in memory. What remains are the ropes of the story. Mackinnon’s reflection on relativity perhaps brings to mind Foucault’s thesis that all we have is a “document,” or text, of an event, or “monument,” and that text is itself presence built upon absence.

It would, however, be difficult to apply this thesis to Mackinnon’s words on memory and communication. Because in spite of the slipperiness of memory and perception, which he acknowledges, Mackinnon also affirms that stories do change “except for the kernel of truth” (15) which remains. There is a perceived genealogy of language and history in the world of Mackinnon/MacLeod that endures, however distorted it might be by memory. As the father says in the title story “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” “You cannot not know what you do know” (126).

Mackinnon struggles to know what he knows, and the strands of love that twist through “Closing” become tangled indeed. As Mackinnon compares the remembered rough sounds of the men in the mining camp with his wife’s world of “avocado appliances,” he finds he is quite outside her world of “meticulous brightness” (7). And yet he longs to “regain what was once real or imagined...The long nights of passionate lovemaking that seemed so short” (18).
MacLeod also professes the remorseful love of a father who has missed the landmarks of his children’s lives. Even the children going to university is a source of mixed emotions for Mackinnon. The children of the miners will never understand “[the] eloquent beauty to be found in what we [the miners] do,” says Mackinnon (24). The young, having followed the advice of their parents, have ended up becoming “fatly affluent” professional men. Dentists, for example, who “move their fat, pudgy fingers, over the limited possibilities of other peoples’ mouths” (22).

Mackinnon muses on the irony that he escaped the confinement of university to incarcerate himself in the seemingly most confining of spaces—the mines. In university he found himself in “sleeping rooms that were too low, by toilet stalls that were too narrow, in lecture halls that were too hot...” (24). “He wanted,” he said “to burst out, to use my strength in some demanding task that would allow me to somehow feel that I was breaking free.” The mine challenges him to use his massive strength, but Mackinnon feels less confined there because the miners are never still—“For we are always expanding the perimeters of our seeming incarceration” (25). “We have sentenced ourselves,” he says, “to enclosures so that we might taste the giddy joy of breaking through. Always hopeful of breaking through though we know we will never break free” (25).

What Mackinnon relishes and holds onto with pride is “The beauty of motion on the edge of violence, which by its nature can never long endure” (24). And so Mackinnon and his men fall back on the Gaelic, which he says was always in him. They become “symbolically a throwback to some lost Celtic tribe.”21 Mackinnon muses: “We have perhaps gone back to the Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar” (19). Yet again, the tangled strands of love wind round Mackinnon extracting a price which he is prepared to pay in order to have a job and still be true to his own daemon his sense of self.
As the story ends, the rain washes away the summer dust off the cars, just as the waterfall had earlier cleansed the miner’s bodies. Perhaps the most enduring image at the end of the tale is the one of the sea obliterating “the outlines of our bodies in the sand....There remains no evidence that we have ever been” (28). If nature indifferently erases the “signs” of human activity, then Mackinnon restores the human story behind the “signs.”

In ABBF two major themes play themselves out, says critic, Ken Mackinnon in the Atlantic Provinces Book Review. One is the continuity of the living and the dead, and the other is the “long homeward journey from exile.” Both themes are present in “Tuning.” Archibald represents what critic Ken Mackinnon calls “the formality, dignity, intensity, isolation and fragility of the Gaelic tradition.” He is the objective correlative for a “yearning for perfection.” The yearning becomes a motif that also has “a religious aura of being exiled from our Father’s land.”

In “The Tuning of Perfection,” Archibald is himself described by Carver as a man who keeps the mountain like a garden (100). The religious imagery again recalls MacLeod’s phrase “prelapsarian return” with which he described the miners going back to the Gaelic language.

The backward look, says Ken Mackinnon, may come about from a “lost sense of community or physical life,” from childhood or the Gaelic past. “More likely,” he says, “it is a combination of the things and worlds from which we have become regrettably alienated.” As a response to our time, the theme of journeying back from exile sees “the backward look” as a way forward.

In “The Tuning of Perfection,” the Gaelic culture itself is under erasure. Archibald, grandson of an Highland Clearances’ emigrant, has become “the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers” (92). “The Tuning of Perfection,” says Christopher Gittings, also “provides a larger context for the contemporary, economically-motivated migration of Gaelic speakers from Nova Scotia.” In this story, love of place and language are palpable,
and like “Vision” the story also portrays strong sexual love.

After an absence of a week, Archibald and his wife would meet one another in the middle of the kitchen floor, holding and going into one another sometimes while the snow and frost still hung so heavily on his clothes that they creaked when he moved or steamed near the presence of the stove (90).

Their desire and love are likened to the monogamous eagles that lived with them high up on the mountain (102). MacLeod uses the images of eagles repeatedly in “Tuning,” and one wonders if he had in mind the symbolic passage from Moby Dick about the nobility of souls. The eagle imagery is also an apt metaphor for Archibald and his vision:

...There is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can dive down into the blackest of gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he forever flies within the gorge, that gorge is within the mountains, so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.26

Archibald, a soul who indeed soars though flying in a gorge, stays on the mountain after the deaths of his wife, his new-born son and his twin brother. Living alone he continues his logging trade while relatives raise his young daughters. Memories of his wife sustain Archibald, and after sitting by her grave and talking to her of his aspirations, “She would come to him and they would talk and touch and sing” (113). Singing Gaelic songs together is a ritual they forged as they built their home, and it is one that Archibald continues to preserve—both as a memorial for his lost love and also because he feels compelled to sing of his own ancestral sorrows. His Grandfather had been a victim of the
Highland Clearances.

“The last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers” finds his integrity tested when a television producer asks him and his family to sing some Gaelic songs for a gala performance, one which will include the Royal family as audience. Archibald asks his daughter Sal as she sings a Gaelic song for him: “Do you know what the words mean?” “No,” she said, “Neither will anybody else. I just make the noises” (97).

Sal does not care about authenticity and neither does the producer. “Look, I really don’t understand your language,” he says, “so we’re here mainly to look for effect” (107). He insists on cutting a narrative right in the middle. “You can’t cut them like that,” said Archibald, “if you do, they don’t make any sense” (108). For “the last of the authentic old-time Gaelic singers,” to sever the ropes of a song before it has completed its twisting is to make a mockery of the unfolding story.

What the producer wants is someone to establish an ethical appeal for his production. Archibald is the ideal candidate as a person of character, high moral nature and guiding beliefs. He is needed to “front” for the rough-and-ready but full-of-energy Carver who agrees to sing whatever the producer wants to hear. Carver says, “Us, we’re adjustable” (111). When Archibald asks him “What did you sing for that producer fellow?” “Brochan Lom,” Carver answers. “Brochan Lom...why, that isn’t even a song. It’s just a bunch of nonsense syllables strung together,” Archibald replies (112).

It is indeed a bunch of nonsense syllables. Sometimes the effect is very musical and seemingly Gaelic.27 And sometimes performers play around with the song and add their own bawdy verses. Jean Redpath, for example, sings this bawdy version:

He’s torna a’ the ribbota, torna a’ ma goon  
What an old prick o’ a loon.  
He tried it on the sofie, he tried it on the chair
And the only place he ca’d do it was lying on the flair.

Archibald insists to Carver that “People in the audiences know. Other singers know. Folklorists know” (112).

Perhaps this is a bit of over-zealous intertextuality on my part, but Jean Redpath is an extremely well-known Scottish folk-singer who has sung for many years, and singers and folklorists would be aware of her version, even if Carver sings a more innocuous one—and I presume he would for the Royal Family. What would make this choice of song doubly distressing to Archibald, if my supposition is correct, is that, firstly, it is a fake Gaelic song and, secondly, the bawdy sexual connotation makes a mockery of the laments that he himself sings.

In “Vision” there are several references to Archibald’s sexuality. The widowed sister-in-law says, “If you don’t use it, it’ll rust off” (93). “I bet it’s rusty right now” (94). When someone wonders if Archibald will be able to handle all the women who are going to sing with him in Halifax, another voice replies “Sure, he will...He’s well rested. He hasn’t used it in fifty years” (104). On the one occasion when MacLeod describes Archibald’s strong sexual passion for his wife, Archibald is, of course, doing it on “the flair” (89).

I realise this reading relies upon knowing recordings of Brochan Lom, but it does seem a possible interpretation of an ironic inclusion that would serve to underscore what Archibald’s family and the producer see as a waning artistry and language that no longer has any use.

Archibald cannot or will not deliver what they want. He will only do “it” his way. The brawling much-scarred Carver is the one person who recognizes Archibald’s integrity. He “sees” Archibald. When he brings a buyer for Archibald’s old mare, Carver says sharply to the questioning business man: “I told you this man don’t lie.” As previously noted, Carver also is in awe of
the way Archibald "treats the mountain as if it were a garden" (100).

Of course, the strongest affirmation of Archibald's "rightness" in maintaining his cherished beliefs come at the end of the story. When Carver and his drunken friends arrive at Archibald's mountain home with a gift of bootleg liquor, he surprises himself by finding that there is much he admires in the wild group:

He also envied their closeness and their fierceness...[and] tremendous energy. And he 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).

Archibald the purist and Carver the compromiser join across the centuries as time and place dissolve in this last scene. "'Look,' said Carver, with that certainty that marked everything he did. 'Look, Archibald,' he said. 'We know. We Know. We really know'" (117). Once more, MacLeod demonstrates the complexity of love, and by that demonstration, I believe, brings into question Barbara Pell's perception of "Tuning" as didactic.28

Two imperatives propel the story, and MacLeod acknowledges the reality of both of them. One is the harsh economic reality that drives Carver, and the second is the memorializing artistic purpose which drives Archibald. By sympathetically bringing these seemingly disparate elements together, and by creating a credible ethos for Carver, we as readers experience how difficult it is "to be certain in our judgements or to fully see or understand" (167). Macleod makes sure that his story and the lives of his characters elude tidy dissection.

During the rehearsals for the Halifax show, Archibald, we are told, has "tried to maintain control and to do it in 'his way'"
(104), but just as Mackinnon and his men in “Closing” have chosen as their adversary “walls and faces of massive stone,” so Archibald has pitted himself against what Ken Mackinnon in the Atlantic Provinces Book Review eloquently describes as “strip mining the Gaelic culture for popular consumption.” That Archibald continues to fight for his ideals is love; that Carver salutes Archibald’s effort is also love.

It is in “Vision” that the strands of love become most tangled. The relationships are often ambiguous. Does the Grandfather still feel something for the wild, blind woman who was once his lover? “‘God help me,’ he said softly and almost to himself, ‘but I could not pass her by’” (152). The story is also complex and labyrinthine, and, changing metaphors, John Ditsky likens it to a Faulknerian narrative mosaic. We, the readers, have to trust the narrator until we can trace, as he does, how the strands of the story interweave. Details are withheld until the story insists on its own telling. Macleod demands that we trust his story-teller.

The young narrator retells his father’s recall of a young man from Canna who told himself and his twin brother their grandfather’s story, and the narrator says: “All of the information that spilled out of him came because it was there to be released” (160). Stories, Macleod tells us, eventually reveal themselves.

“Vision” is metafictive and draws attention to the nature of story-telling. “It is,” says the narrator, “the telling of a story about a story but like most stories it has spun off into others and perhaps no story ever really stands on its own” (166). Wending his way through these stories of stories, the narrator tries to make sense of familial relationships—betrayal and sacrifice, love and death and violence—that spans five generations and extends into the legendary past.30

The link with the legendary past is strong indeed. Again we encounter strong religious images. The name itself Canna—“Green Isle”—conjures up an Edenic image, and Colum Cille or Columba the Dove is associated with the island. But symbols do
not come that neatly packaged in our minds. For Canna is also associated in the grandfather’s memories with old rituals which predate the Christian ones—”carrying the bodies of the dead round toward the sun” (150, 161). And once again physicality intrudes upon the spiritual realm as co-mingling with Canna in the blind grandfather’s mind is his once potent sexuality and the “splendid young stallion” which he owned and which was also himself (161). Wild youth and doves and sex and saints all vie to be part of the grandfather’s story as he tries to know himself.

The themes of “seeing” and “knowing” predominate in “Vision.” MacLeod’s narrator uses the normal cognitive method to make sense of the story. But there is another equally powerful tool of understanding which MacLeod hands to his narrator—the one of second sight. Not that the narrator has the gift himself, but in the stories he recounts, he tells the tale of many people who do—MacAlister’s ancestor, the Grandfather, the twins’ real Grandmother and the narrator’s Father all have the gift.31 And they are also blinded, as though it were “a concomitant of second sight.”32

MacLeod makes extensive use of extra-sensory perception, legends, folk tales and oral history. As well as the folk motif of second sight, he uses the twin motif—young Alex and Angus are twins; the Grandmother gives birth to twins, and she also has twin dogs. In folk-lore, twins are generally credited with having special intuitive powers. It is fitting in a story that emphasises “other” ways of knowing that the twin motif should prevail.

The subterranean “knowing” that lurks in many of the stories in ABBF, but particularly in “Vision,” challenges the reader. Like the narrator, the reader strains to bring the picture into focus. Are those tears on Mac an Amharius’ face, and is that semen on his trousers? Or is it just the rain? (152). The Grandfather, whose name means “Child of Uncertainty,” also tries to bring the picture of his life into focus. He tries to understand the events which have formed his past—events that he has denied or buried (his
continued love for the boys’ real grandmother perhaps)—and he says to the twins, “Sometimes there are things within us which we do not know or fully understand and sometimes it is hard to stamp out what you cannot see” (151). He echoes the father in the title story “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun” who says “You cannot not know what you do know.”

At times the emotional quotient in MacLeod’s stories is almost unbearable. And would be so “were it not for the steady voice that keeps the excess at bay.” The very orality and diction of the “Vision” guards against that excess. The narrator begins “I DON’T REMEMBER when I first heard the story but I remember the first time I heard it and remembered it” (128). The opening words transport us to a fireside, or a kitchen table, and we begin to “listen” as the story unfolds across time and space. The story proceeds like a narrative ballad with the storyteller repeating elements of the story and so unifying his tale. When Ken MacAllester, unaware of the irony, first confides his hopes for the future, he says: “I wouldn’t want to be blind” (134). “At that time,” says the narrator, “he planned on joining the Air Force and flying towards the sun and being able to see over the tops of mountains and across the sea” (134). The narrator returns to Ken MacAllester at the end of the story. Now blinded in one eye after the tavern brawl, he works in Toronto. “Unable ever to join the Air Force and fly towards the sun and see over the tops of mountains and across the ocean...” (167). The repetition makes the story poignant while avoiding bathos.

Though never accused of bathos, MacLeod, as part of the collective of Maritime writers, has been accused of sentimental romanticism. In her book Studies in Maritime Literary History, Gwendolyn Davis cites cultural historian Ian McKay who says that “much Maritime literature is merely literature of nostalgia by middle-class writers who idealized a pastoral, golden age as part of a ‘culture of consolation’.” Not so, says Davis, there is a real “sense of rootedness, of geographical and historical
belonging” for the Maritimer. There is a sense of “the home place” that is bred in the bone or as “Alistair MacLeod put it “The Salt Gift of the Blood.” (10). What McKay ignores, says Davis, and what saves the writing from being merely middle-class romanticism, are “the elements of realism, irony and economic cynicism permeating much of Maritime writing” (196).

Many critics refute the idea of MacLeod as a parochial writer and see a universality in his work. In the way that Dylan Thomas’s Under Milk Wood, though undeniably about a small Welsh village, is saved from the claim of parochialism by its universal human concerns, so ABBF, though unmistakably set in Maritime Canada, extends beyond that particular “home place.” In Under Eastern Eyes, Keefer says that MacLeod has “discovered narrative and rhetorical techniques for ‘breaking through’ in his writing without ‘breaking free’ of his region.” The stories are, of course, set up to “break through.” It is the point at which meaning occurs. It is the function of these old story-telling traditions to have a firm structure that contains emotions, and it is that structure that allows meaning, however relative, to “break through.” MacLeod’s method is a paradigm, Keefer says for “using the particulars of their [the writers] time and place to break through the enclosures which prevent us from knowing ourselves and our world” (238).

Christopher Gittings also looks at Canadian literature of dislocation in an heuristically fertile way. He says:

As citizens of an immigrant or multicultural society, Canadians occupy a space between worlds, often employing our attempts to come to terms with that other world we or our ancestors were dislocated from. Whether these narratives which confront moments of dislocation are found in ethnic-Scottish writings of Margaret Lawrence and Alistair MacLeod [or] in the ethnic-Indian writings of Rohinton Mistry...cross-cultural or comparative
studies offer the critic a viable and potentially insightful approach for reading a wide range of Canadian texts.37

And surely to confront our own dislocations, to go beyond our own enclosures and to transcend the personal is to know something of love. Because of "the twisting and turning of the different strands" within As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories, we, like the narrator, have only partially understood the labyrinth of meanings that MacLeod has woven for us. Because of his "emotional truth," however, we recognize that we have been in the presence of people who know, or strive to know, something of the meaning of love, whether sexual love, or love of kin or place, or love of an idea. That the various strands of love become tangled and twisted is a readily understood metaphor.

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Notes
1. Alistair Macleod. As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories (1986; Toronto; McClelland and Stewart, 1992), p. 167. All quotations are from this edition. Subsequent references will be written as ABBF.
2. I am indebted to Professor Judith Miller of Renison College who helped me focus this idea one I had hinted at in my essay but not fully developed.
   Although Nicholson is speaking specifically of The Lost Salt Gift of Blood, his thesis that many of the stories have twin themes of entrapment and escape also applies to ABBF.
5. Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1983); p. 133.
   Eagelton cites Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Language, Counter-Memory, Practice (New York; Cornell University,
8. Ibid., p. 99.
11. Francis Berces cites Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York & Toronto Random, 1995: rpt. Vintage, 1959). In the Preface...Camus writes “that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism” (v). For Sisyphus, memory is one of the means. He becomes “convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human returning to his rock” (Footnote 6)
17. Donald MacLeod, "Gloomy Memories by Donald MacLeod - Eyewitness to Highland Clearances." Cape Breton Magazine 6 (1987), 29-36. This is a quotation from a letter that MacLeod wrote to the Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle in 1840-41.
   "Alas, alas! I have lived to see calamity upon calamity overtake the Sutherlanders. For five successive years on or about the term day, has scarcely anything been seen but removing the inhabitants in the most cruel and unfeeling manner, and burning the houses which they and their forfathers had occupied from the time immemorial."


22. Ibid., p.3.

23. Ibid., p 3.

24. Ibid., p 3.


27. Jean Redpath and The Galliards did recordings in the vein. I no longer have the records for the details of the recordings, but believe they were made sometime in the 1960’s.


30. Pell, p.171


32. Ken Mackinnon, p.3.

33. Ditsky, p.9.

34. *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines “bathos” as an “unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the absurd or trivial, anticlimax.”


37. Christopher Gittings, p. 104.