
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Survival Narratives in Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines how Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* reconfigures survival as a material, psychological, and cultural practice. Using qualitative close reading, it analyzes the collection's seven stories through recurrent patterns of environmental pressure, dangerous labour, family obligation, migration, Gaelic speech, song, and storytelling. The analysis combines Margaret Atwood's influential account of survival in Canadian literature with scholarship on MacLeod's existential realism, temporal structure, labour mobility, and Highland memory. The findings show, first, that sea, winter, mine, and depleted land expose the body to injury while making work the immediate condition of endurance. Second, survival is psychological and relational: characters persist through responsibility, memory, and difficult choices between departure and attachment rather than through mastery of their circumstances. Third, Gaelic language, communal music, and orally transmitted stories operate as embodied archives that preserve continuity even as modernization turns local culture into an object of nostalgia or consumption. MacLeod's regional settings are therefore not sealed enclaves. They are shaped by migration, extractive economies, and transatlantic memory. The collection ultimately presents survival not as bare continuance or passive victimhood, but as an ethically demanding practice of maintaining dignity, obligation, and cultural relation under persistent loss.

| KEYWORDS

survival narrative; Alistair MacLeod; Cape Breton; regionalism; cultural memory

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1. Introduction

Alistair MacLeod's fiction is inseparable from the coastal and mining communities of Atlantic Canada, yet its regional specificity does not confine its significance. *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, first published in 1976, follows fishers, miners, farmers, teachers, children, and ageing relatives whose lives are organized by weather, work, kinship, and departure. Most of the stories are set in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, while the title story is situated in Newfoundland. Across these locations, sea and land are never neutral scenery. They regulate income, injure bodies, separate generations, and store the memories through which characters understand themselves (MacLeod, 1989).

The collection is especially productive for reconsidering the idea of survival in Canadian literature. Atwood (1972) famously identified survival as a recurring national preoccupation shaped by geography, colonial dependence, and the problem of cultural self-definition. Her formulation remains influential because it names a recognizable pattern: Canadian writing repeatedly stages subjects who must endure conditions they did not choose. Read too narrowly, however, the framework can reduce survival to passive victimhood or treat environment as an abstract national symbol. MacLeod's stories complicate that tendency. His characters are constrained, but they are also workers, caregivers, migrants, singers, and narrators whose choices preserve or damage relationships.

This article argues that *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* develops a three-dimensional survival narrative. Material survival concerns exposure to storm, cold, mine, sea, and bodily exhaustion. Psychological survival concerns the maintenance of dignity under responsibility, bereavement, isolation, and unrealized desire. Cultural survival concerns the transmission of Gaelic speech, song, story, and family memory under modernization and out-migration. These dimensions overlap rather than form a simple

progression. Dangerous work produces grief; grief tests obligation; migration protects bodies while threatening cultural continuity. Survival is therefore not an achieved state but a repeated negotiation among incompatible goods.

The argument also revises the assumption that MacLeod's region is isolated. Cape Breton and Newfoundland appear remote, but their households are connected to urban Canada, international labour circuits, tourism, and an ancestral Scottish past. The stories' most local details consequently reveal pressures that extend beyond locality. By reading environment, inward endurance, and cultural memory together, this study shows how MacLeod turns regional realism into an account of relational survival: the effort to remain answerable to people, places, and inherited forms without pretending that they can be preserved unchanged.

2. Literature Review

Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* provides the foundational vocabulary for this study. Atwood (1972) associates Canadian literature with endurance amid hostile environments and with the positions of victims who must recognize, resist, or transform their circumstances. The model clarifies why cold, distance, failed settlement, and cultural dependency recur so persistently. It also invites qualification. Survival in MacLeod is not only a relation between an individual and nature, nor is victimhood the final identity of his characters. The collection repeatedly locates survival in families and working communities, where endurance may require sacrifice, silence, departure, or the relinquishment of personal aspiration.

MacLeod criticism has long emphasized the interaction between place and inward life. Berces (1991) describes the collection's realism as simultaneously geographical and psychological, arguing that ordinary regional events open onto existential questions of choice, alienation, freedom, and death. This account is valuable because it prevents landscape from becoming mere local colour. Harsh surroundings acquire philosophical force through character, imagery, and narrative form. The present article extends that insight by distinguishing, but ultimately reconnecting, the material and psychological pressures that Berces identifies.

Narrative time is equally important. Nicholson (1985) demonstrates that MacLeod's first-person narrators often speak from a distance while rendering remembered experience with unusual immediacy. Retrospection is not simply a technique for organizing plot. It makes the past available as an active moral claim on the present. In stories of leaving, return, and belated recognition, the narrator survives partly by constructing a relation to what has been lost. Memory does not restore an intact community, but it resists the complete severance of present identity from family history.

More recent regional scholarship situates this memory within political economy. Mason (2013) argues that MacLeod's writing registers the underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada and the long history of labour migration produced by uneven economic change. Even when the fiction speaks in the language of blood, clan, and family, workers move through networks that exceed the region. This perspective corrects romantic readings of Cape Breton as a self-contained traditional world. The mine, the fishing boat, and the road away from home connect the local community to markets and labour demands elsewhere.

Studies of MacLeod's Highland inheritance further clarify cultural survival. Dodeman (2017) reads Gaelic language and collective memory as forms of resistance to displacement, cultural domination, and globalization. Although his main focus is the later story "Clearances," the argument illuminates patterns already present in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*: Gaelic speech marks generational difference; songs connect local bodies to transatlantic histories; and oral practices preserve affiliation where institutions do not. Cultural continuity, however, remains vulnerable to nostalgia and commodification.

These critical traditions often foreground one dimension at a time: national survival, existential choice, narrative memory, labour mobility, or Highland identity. The present study brings them into a single analytical model. Its contribution is to show that MacLeod's survival narrative is generated by the movement among bodily endurance, psychological responsibility, and cultural transmission. None of the three is sufficient alone, and each can undermine the others. Leaving can save a worker while weakening communal continuity; staying can preserve belonging while intensifying bodily danger; remembering can sustain identity while also prolonging grief.

3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative close reading of the original English text of the seven stories in the New Canadian Library edition of the collection (MacLeod, 1989): "In the Fall," "The Vastness of the Dark," "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood," "The Return," "The Golden Gift of Grey," "The Boat," and "The Road to Rankin's Point." The analysis attends to setting, labour, bodily imagery, focalization, temporal shifts, family relations, language, music, and recurrent patterns of departure and return. Rather than treating survival as a fixed theme applied to every story in the same way, it asks what must be preserved in each narrative, what forces threaten that preservation, and what ethical costs accompany the characters' responses.

Atwood's survival framework functions as a starting heuristic, not as a closed national taxonomy. Evidence from the primary text is interpreted in dialogue with Berces's existential account, Nicholson's analysis of retrospective narration, Mason's political-economic reading of regional labour, and Dodeman's discussion of Gaelic memory. The three analytical categories—material, psychological, and cultural survival—were derived from recurrent clusters in the collection. All primary-text references follow the original English text in the 1989 New Canadian Library edition. Because the electronic edition used for this study does not

provide stable page numbers, paraphrases identify each story by title, while short direct quotations are located by story title and paragraph number.

This method does not claim to reconstruct the social history of Cape Breton or Newfoundland from fiction alone. The stories are literary representations shaped by selection, symbolism, and retrospective voice. The aim is therefore interpretive: to explain how narrative form connects physical conditions to moral and cultural questions, and how the collection enlarges "survival" from bodily persistence into a contested practice of relation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Material Survival: Nature, Labour, and Bodily Vulnerability

MacLeod's environments act upon the body before they become symbols. In "In the Fall," the approaching Cape Breton winter reorganizes the family's domestic economy. Shorter days, cold rain, ice, and the coming snow make the continued care of an ageing horse materially difficult. Selling the animal is not merely a practical decision. The horse carries affection, memory, and the child's understanding of loyalty, so the family's attempt to survive winter produces a wound within the household (MacLeod, 1989). Nature creates scarcity, but scarcity is experienced through a human decision for which no participant can remain morally innocent.

The story's force comes from the convergence of weather and betrayal. The season narrows available choices until economic necessity appears inevitable; at the same time, the child's response refuses to let necessity erase responsibility. The violent weather surrounding the horse's removal externalizes this conflict without resolving it. Survival requires adaptation, yet the adaptation damages the ethical world that made survival meaningful. MacLeod thus rejects a heroic model in which people conquer nature. The family endures by accepting loss, and endurance is shadowed by the knowledge that the vulnerable have been sacrificed first.

"The Vastness of the Dark" relocates bodily exposure underground. Mining appears as inherited expertise and as accumulated injury. The father's scarred and impaired body records years of dangerous work, while the mine compresses workers into narrow passages filled with cold, water, dust, and the threat of collapse (MacLeod, 1989). In this environment, labour is not an activity performed upon nature from a position of security. The body enters the material world of coal and rock, breathing its dust and bearing its pressure. Work sustains the family by consuming the worker.

Berces's (1991) description of MacLeod's existential realism is particularly relevant here. Material danger becomes philosophically significant because characters must act without control over the conditions of action. The miner cannot eliminate geological risk, and the fisher cannot stabilize the sea. Bodily vulnerability is therefore not a temporary obstacle that skill eventually overcomes. It is the permanent horizon within which competence, courage, and responsibility acquire meaning.

"The Boat" intensifies this pattern through the father's relation to fishing. The sea provides the family's livelihood, but it also confines him to a vocation he does not desire. His room and his books indicate an intellectual life that cannot be reconciled with the demands of the boat, while his labour keeps the household economically intact. The fatal end of the story makes the contradiction brutally visible: the source of subsistence becomes the medium of bodily destruction (MacLeod, 1989). The narrative does not romanticize the worker's sacrifice. It presents a life in which duty is admirable precisely because the circumstances are unjust and the cost is irrecoverable.

The father's bedroom gives this conflict a precise spatial form. Although it opens directly from the communal kitchen, it remains "like a rock of opposition in the sparkling waters of a clear deep harbour" (MacLeod, 1989, "The Boat," para. 23). The simile converts private reading into a resistant geography: the room is enclosed by the household economy but does not dissolve into it. "Rock" suggests endurance, while "opposition" registers the father's unfulfilled alternative to fishing. Yet the room cannot remove him from the sea visible through its window or from the boat that supports the family. His intellectual survival is therefore partial. Books preserve a self that labour cannot wholly absorb, but the material structure of the house keeps that self beside the work that will ultimately kill him.

Taken together, storm, winter, mine, and sea form what might be called a geography of attrition. Bodies are scarred, exhausted, chilled, and finally broken; domestic objects and routines bear the marks of limited resources. Yet this geography is not purely natural. Mason's (2013) account of Atlantic underdevelopment shows why the collection's workers must be read within wider economic histories. The available occupations are dangerous because regional livelihoods have been narrowed, and migration becomes part of the same survival system. MacLeod's material world therefore joins environment to political economy. Nature exerts real force, but the distribution of risk is organized by work, class, and regional inequality.

4.2 Psychological Survival: Duty, Loss, and Migration

If material survival concerns the body's exposure, psychological survival concerns how characters continue to inhabit lives structured by loss. MacLeod's narrators rarely overcome suffering through explicit confession. They more often endure through work, recollection, and restrained acts of responsibility. Silence is not simply emotional incapacity. It is a social form shaped by

communities in which speech cannot change weather, restore the dead, or remove economic dependence. The stories therefore ask whether inward integrity can be maintained when external options remain radically limited.

The father in "The Boat" embodies this conflict. He accepts a working life opposed to his intellectual desires because his family depends upon him. His survival is not self-fulfilment but the repeated subordination of one possible life to another. The son's later narration cannot rescue the father, yet it can recognize the sacrifice that the household had normalized. Nicholson's (1985) emphasis on retrospective voice helps explain this ethical function. Distance gives the narrator knowledge unavailable to the child he once was, while the present-tense intensity of memory prevents the past from becoming safely finished. Telling becomes a belated form of responsibility.

"The Vastness of the Dark" stages a different response: departure. On his eighteenth birthday, the young narrator leaves the mining community, hoping to escape a future already inscribed on the bodies of his father and grandfather. The road promises autonomy, but the journey repeatedly confronts him with the reach of the history he wants to abandon. Mining towns, displaced workers, and family stories connect Cape Breton to a continent-wide geography of labour (MacLeod, 1989). The farther he travels, the more clearly he sees that mobility does not produce a self without inheritance.

This recognition complicates the opposition between escape and loyalty. Leaving may be necessary for bodily and economic survival; condemning it as betrayal would reproduce the coercion from which the young narrator departs. Yet escape also carries psychological costs: guilt, disorientation, and the fear that freedom has been purchased by denying kinship. Mason (2013) shows that migration in MacLeod is not an exceptional break from regional life but one of its constitutive patterns. Psychological survival therefore requires an identity capable of acknowledging both movement and attachment.

"The Return" reverses the direction of travel. A family journey from Montreal to Cape Breton reveals differences of class, language, and bodily habit between urban respectability and the father's mining origins. Return does not restore a simple home. The visiting child encounters a world that is both his inheritance and a source of estrangement. The father's relation to that world is equally divided: departure has transformed him, but urban success has not cancelled the claims of family memory (MacLeod, 1989). Homecoming makes survival visible as negotiation between incompatible forms of belonging.

"The Golden Gift of Grey" extends this problem beyond Cape Breton by following a Kentucky mining family resettled in northern Indiana. Jesse's parents have escaped an illegal mine and chronic poverty, but migration does not erase class vulnerability. Their son's academic achievement promises a mobility they could not possess, while his embarrassment about their accent, music, and limited literacy turns upward movement into an inward estrangement. His night at the pool table tests whether independence must take the form of repudiation. The thirty-one dollars he wins appears to offer a first adult contribution to the household, yet his parents interpret gambling money as incompatible with the moral order that made their migration endurable (MacLeod, 1989). The story consequently locates psychological survival between two dangers: submission to inherited shame and freedom purchased by contempt for one's origins.

Everett Caudell's intervention prevents that conflict from becoming a simple victory of either generation. After accepting the money so that Jesse can truthfully say he returned it, Caudell quietly places it back in his pocket: "there ain't nothen wrong. There's no lie. You give it to me and I took it" (MacLeod, 1989, "The Golden Gift of Grey," para. 54). The vernacular grammar matters because Caudell solves the crisis from within the parents' working-class world rather than by dismissing its values. His action preserves their prohibition, Jesse's earned skill, and the boy's dignity at once. The solution is imperfect and depends on tacit complicity, but it models survival as ethical mediation: the older migrant enables the younger one to move forward without converting education and autonomy into a rejection of kinship.

The title story offers the collection's most ethically demanding act of relinquishment. A father travels to the Newfoundland community where his son has been raised by maternal grandparents. He initially appears able to assert a biological claim, yet the visit reveals the child's dense network of affection, work, music, and place. The father's final decision to leave without taking the boy can be read as a painful redefinition of paternal responsibility (MacLeod, 1989). Survival here is not possession. It is the capacity to recognize that another person's flourishing may require one's own loss.

Across these stories, resilience is neither optimism nor invulnerability. Characters survive psychologically by giving form to contradiction: duty may coexist with resentment, departure with loyalty, and grief with continued care. Berces (1991) identifies choice and alienation as central to MacLeod's existential world; the collection adds that choice is always relational. A decision becomes meaningful through the lives it protects, abandons, remembers, or permits to continue. Psychological survival is thus an ethical endurance of divided attachments rather than a triumphant escape from them.

4.3 Cultural Survival: Language, Song, and Communal Memory

The collection's deepest survival struggle concerns the continuity of a community whose material basis is disappearing. Gaelic language, inherited songs, family stories, and shared rituals do not function as decorative traces of ethnicity. They are media through which characters locate themselves within generations. At the same time, MacLeod refuses to present tradition as

fully secure. Cultural forms survive in accents, fragments, performances, and memories precisely because ordinary transmission has been weakened.

Language makes this vulnerability audible. In "The Vastness of the Dark," the grandmother's Gaelic-inflected speech marks a generational habit that the young narrator regards with impatience. The pressure to modernize appears in the intimate setting of conversation, where correcting an accent also implies correcting a history. In "The Return," Gaelic can be recognized without being understood, placing the listener simultaneously inside and outside the linguistic community. In "The Road to Rankin's Point," Gaelic persists among elderly speakers even as the institutions surrounding them no longer share it (MacLeod, 1989). Across these scenes, cultural loss is gradual: fluency becomes accent, comprehension becomes recognition, and public language becomes private murmur.

Dodeman (2017) describes Gaelic in MacLeod as a form of resistance to dominant languages and to the erasures of globalization. The earlier collection already supports that argument, but it also reveals the limits of resistance. Language can maintain intimacy among those who possess it; it cannot by itself guarantee transmission to the next generation. MacLeod's characters inherit different degrees of access, and partial knowledge produces both desire and shame. Cultural survival depends upon practices that invite participation rather than treating authenticity as an all-or-nothing possession.

Song provides such a practice. In "The Boat," maritime songs, Gaelic drinking songs, and war songs gather individual workers into a collective voice. The repertoire crosses the Atlantic and attaches ancestral memory to the routes of fishing and labour. Singing is embodied: breath, rhythm, repeated lines, and the presence of other voices make history temporarily communal. The same scene also exposes cultural commodification. Outsiders can record and applaud the sound without understanding the language or the obligations carried by the performance (MacLeod, 1989). A living act of memory risks becoming a portable souvenir.

The narration intensifies this tension when the father's voice leaves the tourist cabins and spreads across the harbour. MacLeod describes its aftermath as "the savage melancholy of three hundred years" hanging over boats, shanties, workers, women, and children (MacLeod, 1989, "The Boat," para. 38). The temporal scale transforms one performance into an embodied archive of clearance, migration, war, and maritime labour. At the same time, the listeners occupy unequal positions. Local workers understand the songs through shared history and language, whereas the tourists possess a tape that can circulate without those relations. Recording therefore secures the sound while detaching it from the community that gives it meaning. Cultural survival requires more than preservation as an object; it depends on continued participation in the obligations encoded by the performance.

Music in "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood" is quieter but equally important. Domestic singing and a child's musical participation join the visiting narrator to a household whose bonds are enacted rather than explained. The child's sense of belonging is supported by repeated gestures, shared work, and sound. Cultural transmission occurs through imitation and presence: the young body learns rhythm before it can articulate history. This helps explain why the father's ethical decision cannot be reduced to blood descent. The child's culture resides in lived relations that a biological claim alone cannot replace.

Storytelling performs a parallel function. The first-person narrators repeatedly reconstruct events from temporal and geographical distance. As Nicholson (1985) argues, MacLeod's interweaving of past and present makes memory a formal principle. Narration keeps the dead and departed within the field of obligation, but it does not erase discontinuity. The adult son who tells "The Boat" remains separated from the father's experience; the travelling youth in "The Vastness of the Dark" cannot return to an unbroken inherited identity. Stories preserve relation by acknowledging the gap across which remembrance must work.

Cultural and material survival therefore cannot be separated. Songs arise from work at sea; mining histories travel with migrant labourers; Gaelic kinship is recalled by people whose economic lives scatter them across Canada and beyond. The region is maintained through movement as much as through residence. This is why nostalgia is both necessary and dangerous in MacLeod. It protects memories neglected by modern institutions, yet it can idealize hardship and conceal the economic pressures that made departure unavoidable. The collection's cultural resilience lies not in freezing tradition but in carrying it through changed circumstances without denying loss.

The three-part framework has a corresponding limit. Not every act of endurance in the collection belongs equally to material, psychological, and cultural survival, and the categories should not convert every loss into evidence of resilience. Scott's death in "In the Fall," the father's death in "The Boat," and the separations that close other stories remain irreparable. Atwood's vocabulary is most useful when it identifies pressures on vulnerable subjects; it becomes reductive if it makes endurance the inevitable meaning of every narrative event. MacLeod's stories instead preserve failed, compromised, and partial survivals. The framework used here therefore describes recurrent relations among body, obligation, and memory rather than a single plot shared by all seven stories. This qualification also explains why survival in the collection is ethical rather than celebratory: characters often maintain one relation only by accepting damage elsewhere.

5. Conclusion

The Lost Salt Gift of Blood transforms survival from a single national theme into a layered practice. At the material level, characters confront sea, winter, mine, and depleted livelihoods that expose the body to continuous risk. At the psychological level, they endure through responsibility, memory, and choices whose costs cannot be repaired. At the cultural level, Gaelic speech, song, and storytelling preserve forms of relation threatened by modernization, migration, and commodification. These dimensions remain inseparable: work shapes family feeling, migration alters memory, and cultural belonging gives bodily endurance its meaning.

This integrated reading also qualifies two familiar interpretations. First, MacLeod's characters are not simply passive victims of a hostile environment. Their agency is limited but ethically consequential, especially when survival requires sacrifice, departure, or relinquishment. Second, the collection's regionalism is not isolation. Cape Breton and Newfoundland are connected to urban Canada, mobile labour, tourism, and transatlantic history. Regional detail becomes the means by which large economic and cultural pressures are made intimate.

The study is limited by its focus on one collection and by its interpretive rather than archival method. Further research could compare survival across MacLeod's later stories and *No Great Mischiefs*, examine gender more fully within the collection's labour and kinship structures, or place its representation of Gaelic culture beside historical accounts from Nova Scotia. Within the present scope, however, the collection's central insight is clear: survival is not merely the continuation of life. It is the difficult work of sustaining dignity, obligation, and cultural memory when no available choice can preserve them without change.

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