Geographic setting

- Majority of the stories are set in the Canadian peninsular province of Nova Scotia, mostly the Cape Breton Island region
- Cape Breton Island = a slightly larger area size than Melbourne
- The peninsula is fairly isolated, connected to the mainland only by a causeway built in the 1950s
- Many live in the more remote coastal areas rather than the urbanised inland settings
- Newfoundland (‘The Lost Salt Gift of Blood’) – a neighbouring province of Nova Scotia

Historical and social context

- Nova Scotia (Latin for ‘new Scotland’)
- Much of its history and culture are closely tied to marine activities
- Declines in fish populations and changes to demand are reducing the province’s dependence on the industry (this decline is reflected in a number of the stories)
- Mining is still an important economic factor for the region, but shifts have occurred in the industry. Coal is no longer the primary resource, so main coalmines have closed (again, a recurring issue in ‘Island’)
- Tourism is an increasingly important economic contributor (‘The Boat’ and ‘Island’)
- The decline in the traditional industries forms a strong backdrop to the collection of stories, with an underlining tone of poverty and economic depression
- There is a clear resistance to the idea of ‘outsiders’
- In Cape Breton, there is a strong Gaelic culture: a result of early settlement by Scots.
- While the official languages of Canada are English and French, the Gaelic language is common among Cape Breton Islanders of Scottish descent
- Some of the characters speak Gaelic with friends and family or sing traditional Gaelic songs as a way of connecting with their own past and culture.

Island collection of stories

- Sixteen short stories set mostly in Nova Scotia, many on Cape Breton Island
- Chronicle the lives of fishermen, miners, farmers and their families
- The protagonists of all of the stories (excluding ‘Island’) are male
- Mostly first-person narrators
• The stories are mostly concerned with moments or periods of transition

• Stories are also interested in exploring experiences of love (family love – particularly father/son or romantic love – lost love)

• There is often a focus on independence, responsibility, decision-making and whether to continue a family tradition or to leave their home community to follow other interests

• The stories often present a bleak view of the remote fishing and mining communities, yet the narrator generally describes their home with great affection, respect and detail

• While the stories are independent of one another, there are many recurrent ideas, images, themes, motifs and concerns

**Tradition and family**

The communities of Cape Breton are founded on tradition and family. The people have struggled against poverty, accidents and the elements to hold their lives together and remain constant in their values. However, MacLeod shows that they cannot keep the modern world from intruding and altering their lives and their landscape. He presents the tragedy of the inevitable loss of their world. As traditional work of Cape Breton begins to dry up the men have to go further away to find employment. As their men leave, the communities feel the strain of separation and the landscape, once bordered by the edges of their little harbour is forced to expand.

• Outsiders make their way into the landscape and see the locals as objects of curiosity. The old culture and music of the fishermen becomes the subject of academic study, like things of novelty. As progress takes over the old world the beautiful landscape is also seen as a business opportunity for people to cater for the ever increasing number of summer tourists.

• The fragility of the old world is shown by MacLeod in the inevitable changes to the landscape that are mourned by the characters. Even the old Gaelic language spoken by the people on Cape Breton represents the private world they inhabit that seems ‘irrelevant and meaningless’ (p.195) to the new world. Yet to the miners and others in Cape Breton they try to continue to speak Gaelic with friends and family or sing traditional Gaelic songs as a way of connecting with their own past and culture.

• The stories often present a bleak view of the remote fishing and mining communities, yet the narrator generally describes their home with great affection, respect and detail.

• The stories are interested in exploring experiences of love (family love – particularly father/son or romantic love – lost love)

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