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**Insight text guide: No Great Mischief**

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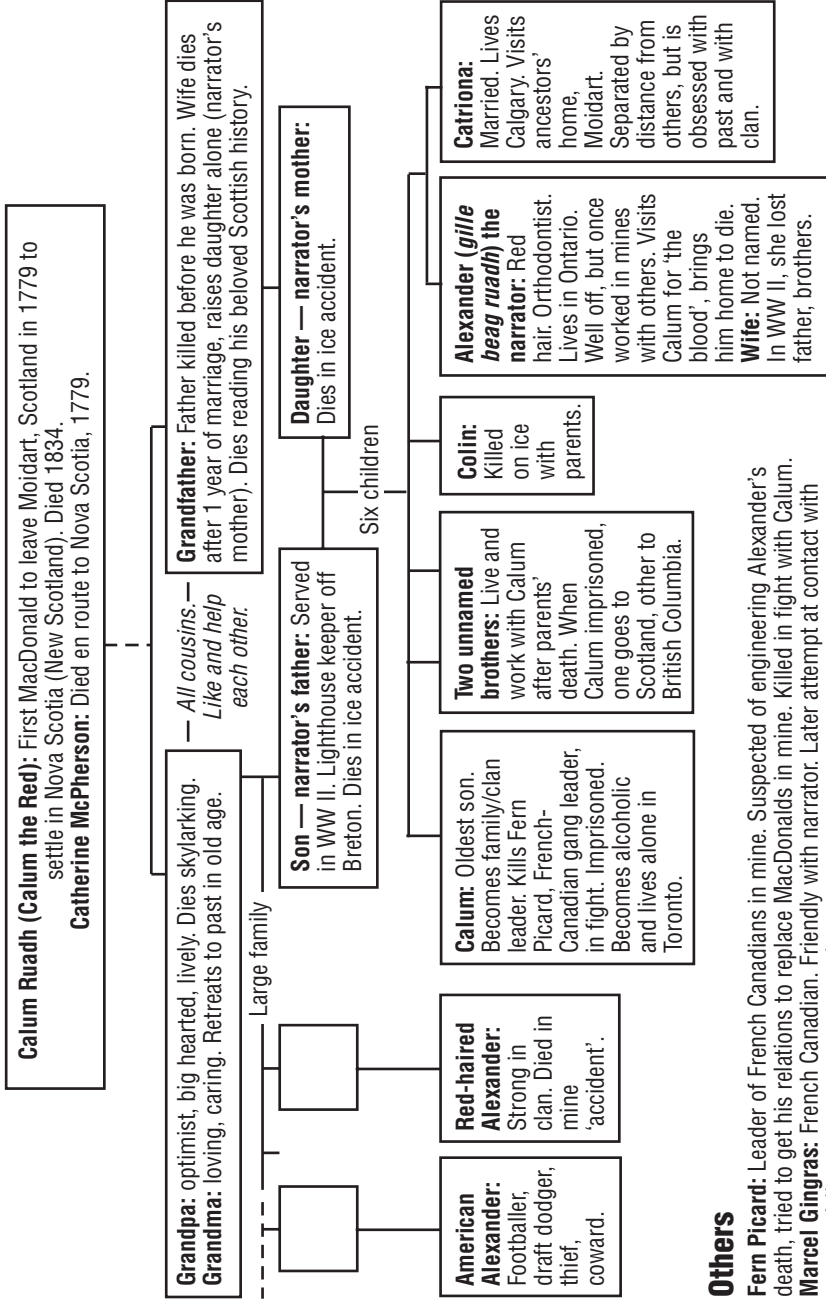
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# MAIN CHARACTERS

## Clann Chalum Ruaidh



## Others

**Fern Picard:** Leader of French Canadians in mine. Suspected of engineering Alexander's death, tried to get his relations to replace MacDonalds in mine. Killed in fight with Calum.  
**Marcel Gingras:** French Canadian. Friendly with narrator. Later attempt at contact with narrator fails — message not passed on.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Born in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1936, Alistair MacLeod moved with his family to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, at the age of ten. Working during summers either logging or mining to pay for his education, MacLeod earned a PhD in English from the University of Notre Dame in 1968. He recently retired from his position as Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor in Ontario. Though admired in Canada for two volumes of short stories, MacLeod was little known to the rest of the world until his first novel, *No Great Mischief*, was published to great acclaim in 1999. It won the Trillium Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2001.

*No Great Mischief* is the story of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, a fictional branch of the great Scottish clan of MacDonald, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The novel follows three generations, each marked somehow by tragedy. Before the narrator's<sup>1</sup> Grandfather was born, his father was killed while logging in the woods of Maine, and in later life he buries his wife and daughter at very young ages. In the next generation, the narrator's parents are killed in a tragic accident; he and his four surviving siblings must struggle to create lives for themselves after so great a loss. This proves hardest for the eldest son, Calum, who continues the 'tragedy' in the third generation when he kills a man in a fight outside a uranium mine in Ontario.

Even before this event, Calum is associated with some of the more tragic leaders of the MacDonald clan, his ancient forebears. Though introverted by nature, Calum must wear the mantle of leadership that descends upon him after the death of his parents. *No Great Mischief* is the story of how the constraints of leadership can impact negatively on a life; we see this all the more clearly through the eyes of Calum's youngest brother, the narrator, whose life could be said to be 'lucky' in comparison. However, each member of the clan, in each generation, is somehow haunted by the past. Some revisit the glorious victories and defeats of the ancient Highlanders and thus make them a part of their very different lives; some look to the past as shelter *against* modern life. We readers come to see the ways in which the past repeats itself, and how it can be a burden to those trying to live in the modern world.

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1 The narrator's name is Alexander MacDonald, but he is rarely called that. Because there are other characters named Alexander MacDonald, I will refer to the one who tells the story as 'the narrator'.

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# BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

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In order to appreciate the way the characters in *No Great Mischief* understand the past, one must have some knowledge of the Scottish Highlanders.

## ***A Brief Introduction to Clan Donald and Scottish Highlanders***

The MacDonalds are the most numerous of the great Scottish Highland clans, many of whom can trace their history back well over a thousand years. (Note: in Gaelic, one of the languages of Scotland before English came to be the dominant language, ‘Mac’ means ‘son of’; thus MacDonald means ‘son of Donald’.) The Highlands, in the northern part of the country, is very rugged, mountainous terrain marked by lakes and moors. It is not particularly suitable to farming or animal husbandry. This is one of many reasons why the ‘old ways’ of the clans, those of a warrior society, survived well into the 17th century. Scotland’s history is a very bloody one, and the Highlands have seen some of the worst fighting, against Britons, Danes and Norwegian raiders, and most commonly, amongst the clans themselves. The great clans became powerful by training their men to be excellent fighters, and by engaging regularly in battle.

The Highlanders played their part in most of the frequent political upheavals in Scotland’s history. There has always been a rivalry between them and the people of the Scottish Lowlands; the Lowlands were populated by clans as well, but for a number of reasons (the land is much better for farming, for example), the Lowlands were much more adaptable to modern living. Most of the stereotypical images often associated with Scottish tradition — the castles in the mist, the lone piper in tartan, the epic battles between fierce warriors — are really stereotypes of the Highlands.

It would be impossible to cover all of the history of the Highlands, but we should mention some of the events that the characters in *No Great Mischief* mention specifically. Most of them took place within a hundred year span, from the late 1600s to the late 1700s, a period of great upheaval for a nation about to finally lose the battle against its ancient foe. Scotland had been at war on and off with England since about the 12th century; by the end of the 17th century, England was coming into its full dominance over the Scots, but there was still resistance, particularly from the Highlanders. Much of the political climate of the time had to do with the contested succession to

the English throne. The Highlanders were firmly behind the cause of Jacobism: the restoration of the Catholic Stuarts (in exile in France) to the Crown of both countries (most of the Stuart, or Stewart, kings were named James—hence the Latin ‘Jacobite’). Needless to say, this pitted the Highlanders against the Hanoverian English monarchs. They met in battle a number of times. One occasion (mentioned in *Chapter 13*) was at the pass of Killiecrankie, where in July of 1689 the Highlanders, under their leader ‘Bonnie Dundee’, ambushed and killed forces of King William. ‘Dundee’ was killed, however, and not long after, the Highlanders were routed at Dunkeld.

### ***The Massacre of Glencoe***

Another incident, mentioned several times in the novel, was the massacre at Glencoe in 1692. As the narrator tells it, this branch of the MacDonald clan were set upon by troops whom they had quartered for two weeks under orders from the ‘Master of Stair’ (the Secretary of State). It had been proclaimed that those clans who had taken arms against King William three years earlier would be pardoned if they took an oath of allegiance to the Crown before 1 January 1692. Mac Ian, the head of the MacDonalds of Glencoe, was deemed a few days late in making his oath (he had apparently tried to take this oath on time); it was decided that his clan would be made an example. Thirty-eight MacDonalds were murdered on the morning of 13 February 1692.

### ***Bonnie Prince Charlie***

In 1707, Scotland was officially joined with England and Wales. Though it maintained a good deal of autonomy, it would not govern itself again. Two more Jacobite uprisings occurred in 1715 and in 1745. They are known as *the ’15* and *the ’45*. The latter was the more serious and consequential of the two; its failure signalled the end of the Jacobite claim on the English and Scottish thrones. *The ’45* is mentioned a number of times in *No Great Mischief*. It is implied that clan patriarch *Calum Ruadh*, who was 21 at the time, took up the call to ‘follow Charlie’. This refers to Prince Charles Edward Stuart, or ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’, who landed in England from France that year (while much of the British Army was otherwise occupied with the War of the Austrian Succession) hoping to gain the English throne.

Prince Charlie managed to draw a number of recruits in the Highlands — including the MacDonalds — and made war on the British. Victory at the

Battle of Prestonpans encouraged him to march on London with a force of 5,000, but could make it no farther than Derby. Prince Charlie never managed to attract many followers outside the Highlands (many from the Lowlands did not join for this very reason). The rebellion never really had a chance without the help of the French, who had been allies with the Scots in the past against the English (referred to as *the auld alliance*). No French ships landed with reinforcements for the cause. A year later, Charlie's forces were routed by the English under the Duke of Cumberland at Culloden in Northern Scotland, a battle mentioned several times in the novel.

### ***Why Highlanders Emigrated***

After Culloden, things became far more precarious for the Highlanders. This is the period when *Calum Ruadh* emigrates with his family to Canada, as did many from the Highland clans. Their traditional way of life was becoming untenable. There was very little to do for so many men raised on war but emigrate and start over in the New World. Those who did not, threw in their lot with their enemy, Britain, as soldiers for the empire. Ironically, the enemy they faced was their old ally, France. Little more than ten years after *the '45*, the British were embroiled with France in a far-reaching conflict known as the Seven Years' War. Its North America theatre, fought mostly in Canada, was known as the French and Indian War because the French were allied with a number of great North American Indian tribes.

### ***General James Wolfe and 'No great mischief'***

One of the key players in the French and Indian War was General James Wolfe, referred to many times in the novel as a model of treachery. Wolfe was sent to capture the city of Quebec held by the forces of the Marquis de Montcalm. After laying siege for about two months, Wolfe tried a cunning tactic, ordering his forces to scale the cliffs surrounding the city; forcing Montcalm out of the city. The Battle of the Plains of Abraham soon followed on 13 September 1759; it lasted less than an hour and was a victory for the British, winning them Quebec. In the battle both Montcalm and Wolfe were killed. A year later the British had won all of Canada.

In their discussions of the Plains of Abraham, characters in the novel focus on the role of the Highlanders in scaling the cliffs of Quebec and winning victory. They also deliberate over this irony: as a young man of 19, Wolfe had perhaps fought against these same Highlanders at Culloden. His

treachery — at least in the eyes of the novel's characters — comes from a private remark he had made about the Highlanders after he took command of them, that it was 'no great mischief' if they fell. In other words, he did not really trust the Highlanders, experienced as they were at fighting. To Wolfe they were expendable.

It is a question for historians whether Wolfe gets fair treatment in this novel. He was certainly a heroic figure. Only 32 and mortally ill with tuberculosis when he undertook the campaign in Quebec, he won a stunning victory over the more seasoned Montcalm. And though much is made of the loyalty of the Highlanders in *No Great Mischief*, Wolfe would surely have had some reason to be wary of men under his command whom he had faced as enemies only 14 years before. Without question, rightly or wrongly, he would have seen the Highlanders as little more than mercenaries (even if they were now British citizens); a view commonly held by most commanders of that age towards 'hired troops'.

## ***Nova Scotia***

Many of the migrating Scots settled in Nova Scotia (in Latin it means 'New Scotland'), one of the maritime provinces of Canada and home to a thriving shipping industry based in the capital, Halifax. The family in the novel, the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, settles in Cape Breton, a large island off the north coast of Nova Scotia. There were times in history when Cape Breton had its own dominion, but in 1820 it was permanently united with Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia has topographical similarities to Scotland, though it is more forested. Ninety percent of the land is unsuitable for agriculture. Work would have revolved either around the sea or logging or mining. Cape Breton is known for its own 'Highlands', mountainous and forested, as well as its rocky coastline. It would have been a difficult place to scratch out a living for the new migrants, but one imagines that there was much reason for them to feel 'at home'. And this no doubt explains some of the persistence of traditional Scottish culture in Cape Breton even today, including the study of Gaelic.

Nova Scotia was not untouched by the French and Indian War; a battle was fought on Cape Breton. Not mentioned in *No Great Mischief*, but of historical importance, is a small but disturbing chapter in the history of the British Empire. The first European settlers to arrive in Nova Scotia in 1605 were French; they called the area Acadia after the local Micmac Indian name for

it. After a long dispute between France and England over the territory, it was awarded to Britain in 1713 under the Treaty of Utrecht (this is when it was renamed Nova Scotia).

In 1750, the descendants of the original French settlers were expelled from Nova Scotia when they refused to swear loyalty to the British and adopt Protestantism. This expulsion was particularly brutal; families were intentionally split up and put on different ships without any idea of their destination. Needless to say, many never saw each other again. A large number of these exiles found their way eventually to Louisiana — at that time a French colony — where they stuck together and became known as ‘Cajuns’ (the local pronunciation of ‘Acadians’). They live there to this day. Though not mentioned at all in the novel, this episode has many parallels to the central events of *No Great Mischief*.

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# GENRE, STYLE & STRUCTURE

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## **Genre**

*No Great Mischief* maintains a consistent narrative voice; only one person tells the story — the narrator, Alexander MacDonald. He uses *recalled* dialogue quite frequently for the purpose of letting characters speak with their own voice. As readers we make a kind of ‘contract’ with authors; here we must agree to accept that the narrator’s memory is so powerful as to be able to remember what people said years earlier. But few other demands are made on our credulity in *No Great Mischief*. This is a realist novel. It is not beyond our belief that all the events in the novel could have actually happened.

## **A Realist Novel**

As a realist novel, *No Great Mischief* puts itself in a certain position of authority. When authors tell a very realistic story, they are usually trying to convey a particular viewpoint. We are expected to accept this viewpoint as believable, accurate, and thus applicable to our own lives. *Naturalism*, a school of writing which first came into prominence in the late 19th century, espoused very realistic writing as a refreshing technique at a time of conventionality, and as an instrument of social change. *No Great Mischief* is not a work of *Naturalism* in this sense (its writing aspires too much to a poetic quality for that), nor does it seem to want to reform society. Yet its believability does demand a certain attention. It tells us that this is a ‘real’ story about the desires, the failings, the joys, the sorrows etc., of ‘real’ people. Indirectly it tells us also that their story has bearing on our own lives. Another intention is that because the story is so believable, the opinions presented in it must be valid. This does not mean that MacLeod’s book contains propaganda, but this is one of the characteristics of realism — its believability automatically lends its message a kind of authority that non-realistic writing cannot so easily achieve.

## **Style**

*No Great Mischief* is a serious novel which indicates that it has an important point to convey (see THEMES & ISSUES for further discussion). It is not humourless, but having a fairly tragic message about loss of cultural heritage