

Donald B. MacMillan (1874-1970)

Dan and Miriam MacMillan aboard the *Bowdoin*. Mrs. MacMillan served alongside her husband as chief supplier and ship's photographer for over 15 years.

Donald B. MacMillan — “Dan” to his family, “Cap’n Mac” to the crew of his beloved schooner *Bowdoin*, Rear Admiral, USNR, to those whose paths crossed his later in his life — was one of this century’s pioneers of arctic exploration. He viewed himself, however, as a learner and teacher. When asked why he continued to journey north, he always replied, “to learn”.

Hundreds of young men, as well as the distinguished scientists, engineers, and university professors who served with him aboard the *Bowdoin*, attest to his ability to encourage their learning — through example, through his insatiable curiosity about the world around him, through his quiet but steady encouragement, and through his profound belief in the capacity of the individual to develop himself to his highest potential.

There were many shaping influences in Mac’s life. His family were legatees of a long seafaring tradition in Canada and in New England, producing a love of the sea in Mac that seemed almost inborn. His high school principal in Freeport, Maine, encouraged the penniless young Mac to attend Bowdoin College in nearby Brunswick, and his experiences at the college were formative. Then came a serendipitous meeting with Robert E. Peary, who learned of Mac’s rescue of nine people in boating accidents off an island in Casco Bay. This chance encounter later induced Peary to ask young MacMillan to serve on the expedition that led to the discovery of the North Pole in 1909. (Mac took charge of the support group on that expedition and did not accompany Peary to the Pole.)

He was born in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1874, the son of Captain Neil MacMillan, an intrepid skipper of sailing vessels, and of Sarah Gardner MacMillan, a shipbuilder’s daughter. Captain Neil MacMillan and his crew were lost at sea in 1883 when the schooner *Abbie Brown* sank during treacherous gales off the west coast of Newfoundland. Gallant, but her health frail, Mrs. MacMillan was not equal to the demands of supporting and caring for a family of five children. She died in 1886. After several years in Provincetown as the “adopted son” of another sea captain’s family, Dan moved to Freeport to live with an older sister.

Donald B. MacMillan was never overpowered by adversity. To help with meager family finances after his father’s death, Dan, at age nine, peddled cranberries at a penny a quart, sold lemonade, skinned dogfish, and dove for pennies thrown by passengers on excursion boats in Provincetown. Later, to meet expenses at Bowdoin, from which he graduated in 1898, he served as janitor in the Freeport High School, pumped the organ in a local church, cut linings in a shoe factory, sold books door-to-door, drove a milk wagon very early in the morning, and took time off from college to earn money by teaching school. Upon graduation, all his bills had been paid through his own efforts; he was in debt to no one.

After teaching for 10 years, MacMillan joined Peary’s polar expedition in 1908. His life was centered on the Arctic for the next 46 years, most of which he spent aboard the *Bowdoin*. In fact, Mac’s last trip North aboard the *Bowdoin* came in 1954, when he was 80 years old.

Between 1913 and 1917, while in North Greenland, Mac drew on his experience and observation to conceive the design

for the 88-foot *Bowdoin*, a wooden schooner of incredible strength that took its name from Mac’s alma mater. The *Bowdoin*, now under restoration, is a story in herself, though one that cannot be included here. During 26 voyages between 1921 and 1954, MacMillan sailed her to and explored parts of North Greenland, Ellesmere Island, Bay Fjord, Eureka Sound, Labrador, Baffin Island, Iceland, and the east and west coasts of Greenland. Over the years, he mapped many previously uncharted northern waters. Owing to his unique and extensive knowledge of those areas, MacMillan was recalled to active duty by the U.S. Navy during World War II. He served in Washington while his schooner, commissioned the USS *Bowdoin*, served the Navy in her “home” waters.

The contributions made by MacMillan and his crews to the knowledge and understanding of the North are too numerous to elaborate here. They include studies in the botany, ornithology, meteorology, oceanography, archaeology, glaciology, and anthropology of the regions explored. As well, Mac and his crews demonstrated that airplanes could be used effectively above the Arctic Circle and that short-wave radio could provide instant communication with the rest of the world.

Those scientific and technical accomplishments — “firsts” in their time — were paralleled by Mac’s interest in and love for the native people with whom he often lived, whose languages he mastered, and by whom he was deeply revered. He provided lumber and materials for the building of the MacMillan-Moravian Mission School for Inuit children in Nain, Labrador, for many years providing books, food, and clothing for the students, equipment for the school, including an electric generator that also lighted the mission house and church, and even false teeth for adults in the community.

Dan MacMillan — learner, teacher, leader, explorer — was a very modest man. He wore lightly the honors bestowed on him during his lifetime. Perhaps the one that tickled his fancy the most was the following telegram from Alan Shepard on behalf of the astronauts in NASA, sent on the occasion when, at age 93, Mac was awarded the Bradford Washburn special medal from the Boston Museum of Science: “Hearty congratulations. Sorry we could not have helped you at the Pole. Have space for a trip to the moon....are you available?” Dan, who very seldom swore, turned to me and said, “Damn sure I am.”

FURTHER READINGS

- ALLEN, EVERETT S. 1962. Arctic Odyssey: The Life of Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.
- MACMILLAN, DONALD B. 1927. Etah and Beyond: Life within Twelve Degrees of the Pole. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- _____. 1933. Four Years in the White North. Boston: Hale, Cushman, and Flint. (Also published elsewhere in 1918 and 1925.)
- _____. 1943. Eskimo Place Names and Aid to Conservation. Washington, D.C.: The Hydrographic Office, U.S. Navy.
- MACMILLAN, MIRIAM. 1948. Green Seas and White Ice. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.

Miriam MacMillan
Owls Head, Maine 04854
U.S.A.