

# ARCTIC EXPLORER: REAR ADMIRAL DONALD B. MACMILLAN

Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan, Provincetown's most famous son, was born on November 10, 1874 at 574 Commercial Street. From the beginning, an adventurous spirit, an indomitable will and a mind given to extraordinary inquiry were marks of his character. Throughout his very long life, Donald B. MacMillan was a man capable of great feats of physical strength and endurance which were always accompanied by a patient good nature, steady judgment and genuine caring for his fellow man.

Donald B. MacMillan's father, Neil MacMillan, was a Cape Breton Scotchman and a redoubtable fisherman. He was lost on the west coast of Newfoundland in the winter of 1883 when MacMillan was only nine years old. His widow, Sarah MacMillan, took in laundry to support her children, but it was too much for her fragile health, and she died three years after her husband's death in 1886. From that time on, MacMillan's survival depended largely on his own resources which proved to be remarkable. Always poor and always working his way, he managed to attend Bowdoin College, a circumstance made possible by the fact that he could live with his sister, Lettie MacMillan Fogg, at Freeport, Maine, a short distance away.

Trained as a teacher of the natural sciences, MacMillan was in a class by himself and, throughout life, took his researches into the field with meticulous attention to the disciplines in which he was most interested which were ornithology, botany and geology. Hand in hand with his intellectual ability was his physical prowess and his dedication to educating young minds and bodies to think and to survive in nature. To this end, he held numerous teaching positions in Maine and elsewhere. His unusual propensity for demonstrating survival skills and an adventurous spirit came to the attention of the Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary by a fortuitous rescue of nine boys at a summer camp in Casco Bay, Maine near an island where Peary was summering with his son. From that time on, Peary kept MacMillan in his sights for his expedition to the North Pole. In 1909, Peary's last, and ultimately successful, expedition to reach the Pole included Donald B. MacMillan.

In 1920, "Captain Dan" supervised the building of the schooner Bowdoin, known at the time to be the strongest wooden ship in the world. MacMillan sailed the Bowdoin from 1921 to 1957 in one expedition to the Arctic after another. He is responsible for charting hundreds of miles of coastal waters along the coasts of Labrador, Baffin Island, western Greenland and many other previously uncharted areas of the frozen North, and in all of these voyages, he never lost a man. MacMillan always took with him scientists from many scientific disciplines, and from 1938 until the Bowdoin was retired in 1957, he also took aboard the Bowdoin, hundreds of college and high school students to give these young men an educational experience that would last them lifelong. Some of these alumni of Captain Dan's eventually commandeered his beloved Bowdoin and restored her to sailing condition. She is berthed today at Castine, Maine and is used as a training vessel for the Maine Maritime Academy.

MacMillan's rapport with the Eskimos of the North was unique and enabled him to accomplish miracles of exploration which had been denied previous exploratory expeditions. He established a school for the Eskimo children in Nain, Labrador called the MacMillan-Moravian School for Eskimo Children, and he provided this school with many essentials brought from the white man's civilization for the very first time. His wife, Miriam Look MacMillan, whom he married in 1935, assisted him wholeheartedly in this work and carried it on long after he had died.

Provincetown, of course, was ever dear to MacMillan, and he treasured his friends here, a number of whom accompanied him on several voyages to the Arctic: Ex-Coastguardsman, Frank Henderson; the sculptor, William Boogar; the carpenter extraordinaire, raconteur and his first mate on many a voyage, Jonathan (Jot) Small and cook Tony Alexander.

MacMillan is honored in his home town in many ways, but especially by the naming of MacMillan Wharf at the heart of its pulsating fishing life where he first acquired his love for the sea. This Provincetown Heritage Museum, once the Center Methodist Episcopal Church, also represents a legacy that was very important to MacMillan. As communications displayed in this case show, he was in constant touch with the congregation here during the Arctic expedition in 1927-1928 in which he established radio contact on a continuing basis with the outside world. In 1958, when the congregation proposed to sell this nearly one hundred-year-old church for an art museum, MacMillan pleaded strenuously against the sale. Undoubtedly, he would be immensely pleased today to see this history recited here in the edifice he loved so much.

Referenda: Everett S. Allen and Donald B. MacMillan-  
*Arctic Odyssey, The Life of Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan*, Dodd Mead & Company, New York, 1962