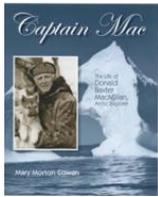


EAGLE ISLAND JOURNAL, Volume XV, Number 2, Fall 2010. Published by the Friends of Peary's Eagle Island

Captain Mac-The Life of Donald Baxter MacMillan, Arctic Explorer by Mary Morton Cowan; published by Calkins Creek, Honesdale, PA., 2010. *Reviewed by Steve Ingram*



Maine author Mary Morton Cowan first introduced Donald MacMillan to young readers in *Ice Country*, an historical novel based on MacMillan's explorations and adventures in the Arctic regions. *Captain Mac* is a comprehensive biography of Donald MacMillan for young people that maintains the sense of adventure of the novel, even for this 'young reader' well over 60! Author Cowan uses a familiar, story-telling style, as if telling bedtime stories about Grandpa to a younger generation, to relate the adventures and contributions of MacMillan as mentee, then colleague, then successor to Admiral Peary as one of America's early Arctic explorers.

Using many of MacMillan's own photographs to complement her simple sentences in rapid, staccato succession, Cowan captures MacMillan's early fascination with sailing and with the tales of exploration in the far North. The individual commitment and effort it took to translate that fascination into sufficient preparation and expertise to be invited by Peary to join his 1905 expedition to find the North Pole is an early theme of the book. That MacMillan had to decline that invitation, because he had recently signed a contract and thereby made a commitment to teach at Worcester Academy, was poignantly recounted by Cowan in her quote from MacMillan, "Neither Peary nor Captain Bob Bartlett knew that I cast off her (the Roosevelt's) lines from the (Portland) dock and sat there long after everyone had gone, watching her steam out past the breakwater and on past Portland Head out to sea. My one opportunity-and I had refused it!" Fortunately for MacMillan and Peary a second chance came in Spring, 1908, when Peary again invited MacMillan "...to be in command of one of my supporting parties." People familiar with Peary's successful 1909 discovery of the North Pole know the contribution MacMillan made to that effort. At one point Peary gave MacMillan credit for saving the expedition when several days delay waiting for the 'Big Lead' to freeze over eroded the enthusiasm and confidence of the Inuit team members. MacMillan, using his teaching skill and expertise, got the Inuit involved in physical contests and games to pass the time constructively and history has recorded the ultimate success of that expedition.

Cowan, with her gift for story-telling, goes on to portray MacMillan as a physically athletic, intellectually curious, culturally sensitive and politically astute individual who committed his years after the Pole expedition to continued research in the far north. Like Peary with the Roosevelt, MacMillan designed and oversaw the construction of his research sailing vessel, the Bowdoin, named after his undergraduate alma mater. He commanded the Bowdoin on summer and multi-year research trips to the Arctic regions until well into his seventies. Scientists from many disciplines including biology, botany, chemistry, anthropology, and meteorology became sailors under MacMillan's guidance. Contributing as a deck hand became a requirement for any scientist invited along. Eventually students became contributing members (both as sailors and research assistants) of each scientific expedition. When the Bowdoin was decommissioned after WWII, MacMillan, with the help of many 'alumni' from his research trips, resurrected the Bowdoin for use as an educational training vessel. The Bowdoin is now a training vessel for Maine Maritime Academy.

MacMillan may have pioneered the concept of building schools for disadvantaged subcultures by raising the funds and providing the materials and building expertise to construct a school for the Inuit in Nain, Labrador. Between polar region research expeditions, MacMillan served on active duty in both World Wars as a naval aviator and used this experience to pioneer air flight to explore Arctic regions. He retired from the Navy as Rear Admiral in 1954. Captain Mac died at age 95.

Cowan has recounted a life full of adventure and commitment- a commitment to research and exploration for the common good. Can it compete for the attention of modern youth with today's video games and technology's assaults on the senses? That she has tried is clear indication that all hope is not lost!