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Life of a Centreville Socialist

*The Artful Labours and Concrete Thoughts
of Charles Macdonald, 1874–1967*

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History Honours Thesis
Queen University
April 2002

“I remember those deep blue eyes as if it were yesterday,” says Kaye Slipp, who first saw them sixty years ago. “He was a magnificent man. People around here felt that Charlie was different.”¹ And so he was. Charlie was a small, determined man who in his small way managed to live the life he pleased in spite of the disapproval and incomprehension of many of his neighbours. In Centreville, Nova Scotia, the principal landmark is a yellow house built entirely of concrete. The ninety-year-old home resembles little else in the Annapolis Valley, with its plastic forms, odd building material, and Mediterranean style, and a museum has operated there since 1996. While the house and the life-size concrete animals on its lawn are familiar to people across the Annapolis Valley, their builder Charles William Macdonald (1874-1967) has become a mysterious figure only thirty years after his death.

Charles Macdonald was born in Steam Mill, Nova Scotia, on April 5, 1874, the second of six children. His grandfather, the Presbyterian Reverend John Macdonald, had brought the family from New England to the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia. Charlie’s father Nathaniel took up the characteristic Valley profession of apple-grower.² Macdonald took neither religion nor farming as his vocation, however, for art came to him very early in life. When an old man, Charlie told Frank Fillmore, the journalist son of his friend and neighbour Roscoe Fillmore, “I guess it just started when I was young. I remember seeing something I liked to look at and I just drew what I saw and I’ve kept drawing and painting ever since.”³ Sketching became a life-long passion of Macdonald’s, and many of his studies of trees, people, and farm animals still survive. Apparently,

¹ Marilyn Smulders, “Saving the house Macdonald built,” The Daily News (Halifax), 1 June 1997, p. 50.

² Charles Macdonald had one older brother, John Arthur, born 1872, and one younger brother, Ralph, born 1876. The three boys had three younger sisters: Alena, born 1879, Violet, born 1884, and Daisy, born 1895. A notebook of Charlie’s indicates that his family came originally from Glencoe, Scotland, where his great-grandfather Jonah was born in 1784.

³ Frank Fillmore, “Retired Seaman Still Drawing at 87,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: c. 1960.

however, Macdonald's devotion to art made him into a bit of a loner as a child.⁴ All of his life, Charlie would be his own man, pursuing his own projects for his own reasons.

In 1976, after Macdonald had been dead for almost a decade, his widow Mabel donated to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia a sketchbook that her husband had kept almost a century before. The "album of watercolours and sketches" is a small thing, no longer than a freshly sharpened pencil and perhaps half as wide. A barely legible inscription on the inside cover reads, "C. McDonald Steam Mill."⁵ The sketches inside the book run mostly to life studies and still lifes, and do not have titles so much as they have labels, "oak," "Neddie Brown," "Study of Stone," "Study of Rabbit." Several different drawings often crowd onto the same page, probably representing the youthful Macdonald's effort to save paper. A few finished works stand out. Some, like "In Steam Mills," are clean and precise. Others, like "spring foliage," are smudged, wild, and impressionistic. All of them present a world that is idealized, idyllic, and bucolic.

Among the pencil sketches, one shows a boy no more than fourteen or fifteen who stares candidly back at the viewer. Added in ballpoint pen (probably in later years, then) is the word "myself." The fifteen year-old Macdonald in the sketch left school in 1889. Charlie went to work in Kentville, the shire town of his native Kings County, first as the apprentice to an undertaker and coffinmaker, then as a helper in the carriage-shop of a wheelwright. So passed the next three years, during which he had only three days of holiday. Near the end of his life Macdonald recounted for a journalist, "I was paid the magnificent sum of twenty-five dollars a year and board for the first year, thirty-five dollars for the second, and fifty dollars for the third."⁶ Three years of working in

⁴ Patrick Condon Laurette, Charles Wm. Macdonald: Seaman, Labourer, Artist, Manufacturer (1874-1967) (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1980) 2.

⁵ Macdonald's spelling was somewhat unreliable, and he wrote his name in a variety of different ways during his life. His family members say that "Macdonald" is the correct spelling, and it shall prevail in the present paper.

⁶ "From Undertaker to Ship's Carpenter, C. Macdonald." The Advertiser. Kentville, NS: undated clipping from the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society.

Kentville left Macdonald restless, and he spent two years of “fooling around at this and that” before deciding to travel.⁷

In 1895, Macdonald, like so many young Nova Scotians before him, went away to sea. Charlie worked as a ship’s carpenter, a somewhat ironic circumstance for a man who would say so much against wooden construction later in his life. First Macdonald sailed out of Boston, reversing his grandfather’s journey to Nova Scotia. Later Charlie sailed out of New York. In 1898, Macdonald shipped out of New York bound for South America aboard the “Francis S. Hampshire,” one of a heterogeneous crew of Germans, Norwegians, Cockneys, and one Valley boy. The end of the nineteenth century signaled also the end of the Golden Age of Sail when huge windships sailed around the globe. A 1000-ton three-masted wooden barque like the Francis S. Hampshire already must have been something of an anachronism in 1898.⁸ In an evocative meeting of the future and the past, the Hampshire sailed right underneath that iconic miracle in steel, the Brooklyn Bridge, “the lofty spars just grazing the great arch overhead.”⁹

Macdonald loved the sea, although he did wonder “how this progressive nineteenth century people could use a conveyance as slow and uncertain as a sailing ship.”¹⁰ Long after he had settled into the life of a land-lubber, Macdonald would look “dreamily out to sea.”¹¹ In his later years Charlie took evident relish in sharing yarns about the great days of sea-faring, and he left several published interviews with journalists that allow us to reconstruct his trajectory during his seven years as a sailor. “F.M.R.,” writing for the Christian Science Monitor in 1941, says that Macdonald told her stories about Paris, Seville, Istanbul, Leningrad [St. Petersburg], London, New York, Rio de

⁷ Frank Fillmore, “Retired Seaman Still Drawing at 87”

⁸ “C. Macdonald Recalls Beautiful Sea Storm,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 1961. Clipping from the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society.

⁹ Charles Macdonald, “Barque F.S. Hampshire, New York,” PANS MG1, Vol 1311C. This account of Macdonald’s voyage from New York to Brazil is found in the middle of a much larger record-book, and seems to have been written at several years remove from the events that it describes.

¹⁰ Charles Macdonald, “F.S. Hampshire”

¹¹ F.M.R., “The Little Man by the Sea, Christian Science Monitor: 6 October, 1941, p.12

Janeiro, Valparaiso, Lima, and Buenos Aires.¹² F.M.R., it should be emphasized, spent only a day with Macdonald.

Macdonald continued sketching at sea, inspired by the sights he saw. Macdonald seems to speak with a painter's eye when he says, "Strange to say, there is great beauty in these storms and squalls. They are colourful – blues and greens in particular – when they break. The white which curls up over [the waves] makes such vivid contrast, and shows a wonderful variety in shades of color."¹³ As a ship's carpenter with his own shop aboard, Macdonald had much more freedom than the other crewmen. Macdonald reminisced, "I could work when I felt like it and was my own boss. If I saw any whales or ships I could get out my pencil and paper and draw them."¹⁴ Tiny, detailed watercolours also began to fill the sketchbooks. Patrick Condon Laurette estimates that the self-taught Macdonald "fashion[ed] his own brand of brush and palette knife luminous shimmer."¹⁵ He also found time to read, write letters, and learn the mandolin.

The Hampshire stopped at many ports along the way, and as an old man, Charlie described an alarming encounter with bandits in Tampico, Mexico, for the Kentville newspaper. Macdonald's sense of social justice was already alert, and he said of Tampico that American oilmen had taken over the city, and that "natives were expected to turn over the sidewalks to these tall dressy Yanks. No wonder they were not popular."¹⁶

The Hampshire's final destination, Santos, Brazil, had a baleful reputation amongst sailors for yellow fever and treacherous waters. Macdonald wrote in his account that wrecked ships, reduced to only their frames, lay along the shore "looking like the skeletons of some antedeluvian [sic] creatures which had lain there for centuries."¹⁷ Some

¹² "The Little Man by the Sea" p. 12

¹³ "C. Macdonald Recalls Beautiful Sea Storm"

¹⁴ Roma Senn, "Charles MacDonald, painter, is finally discovered," *Atlantic Insight*: December 1980/January 1981, p. 50

¹⁵ Laurette 4

¹⁶ "From Undertaker to Ship's Carpenter"

¹⁷ Macdonald, "F.S. Hampshire"

have speculated that the Portuguese colonial architecture of Santos inspired Macdonald to build his Mediterranean-style house back in Nova Scotia. Overall however, Macdonald found Santos “too much modernized to be very much attractive.”¹⁸ On Oct. 6, 1898, the Hampshire finished taking on ballast and sailed a difficult eleven days to the Barbados, where Macdonald left the barque for the tramp steamer S.S. Buffon. For Macdonald, the Age of Sail had ended.

The S.S. Buffon plied the Caribbean, and then crossed the Atlantic to England. In England, Macdonald joined the gleaming new 2 500-ton steamer S.S. Broadgarth. The Broadgarth, manned by a crew of “Geordies,” would be Macdonald’s home for two years. She sailed from Tynemouth to Murmansk, St. Petersburg, through the Dardanelles to Odessa (“a rare town, what I saw of it”) where she took on a cargo of wheat for Holland.¹⁹ The Broadgarth seems to have made several voyages for the Dutch wheat trade, which may explain the large number of watercolours that Macdonald made of windmills and tulips. Mabel said that Charlie would rent a bicycle and go on sketching trips in the Dutch countryside.²⁰

The Broadgarth next sailed through the Mediterranean, by way of Nantes, stopping at Gibraltar, Malta, Pompeii, and Constantinople. Macdonald continued to stay in touch with his sisters by letter, and valued news from home. On Dec. 12 of 1901, he wrote from Gibraltar (the subject of an impressive watercolour) to his sister “Daisica” (the future Daisy Blanchard), “Got your nice long letter all right, telling about the dear little cows and horses and the great big pigs and kittens what you have at home.”²¹ Perhaps he was a little homesick. At least, as the letter reveals, he had a kitten to keep him company during lonf empty hours in the open sea.

¹⁸ Macdonald, “F.S. Hampshire”

¹⁹ “From Undertaker to Ship’s Carpenter”

²⁰ Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview with Joan Kennedy, Transcription from audiocassette. 28 April 1978.

²¹ Charles Macdonald, Letter to Daisy Macdonald: 12 December 1901, Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society archives.

In spite of his continued fondness for his home country, Macdonald remained very restless. Soon Charlie and the Broadgarth were steaming their way to Bombay [Mumbai] in British India. Having passed through the Suez Canal (“quite a ditch”²²), the Broadgarth docked at Port Saïd, where a group of “lively little boys, most of them black as tar, and singing Ta-ra-ra-boom-da-ay” came right up to the Broadgarth and called Macdonald and chief engineer Alex Mackenzie by name, amazing Macdonald.²³ Travelling was growing on Charlie. As Charlie explained in a letter written from Cudalore, India, on March 18, 1902, “foreign travel is like smoking – you get sick of it at first and grow to like it at last when you don’t like to give it up.” While Charlie could imagine coming home, he would only do so in order to start another journey. “Do you know what I should like to do when I get back?” he asked his eighteen-year-old sister Violet.

Answering his own question, Charlie confided that

I would like to take a small (very small) bundle of tools and some other things which I won’t mention and a pipe (this is all confidential, you know) and walk and work my way from Halifax to Puget Sound from Baffin Bay to Bear River [NS] and from Black Rock [NS] to Canada ditch if you like. Anyway I would like to travel all over the fair land of Canada say for three years. What a boundless ambition I’ve got, haven’t I, well I haven’t started yet.²⁴

Charlie would realize his “boundless ambition” soon enough. For now, though, he had a voyage to finish.

The Broadgarth tooled around the East Indies for months, landing in Bombay several times. Macdonald had mixed memories of the subcontinent, saying, “I remember the terrible poverty of that part of the world, the crowds on the streets and people living and dying in the streets too.”²⁵ The last port of call was the French enclave of

²² Frank Fillmore, “Retired Seaman”

²³ “C. Macdonald Recalls Beautiful Sea Storm.”

²⁴ Charles Macdonald, Letter to Violet Macdonald: 18 March 1902, Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society archives.

As his remarks suggest, Macdonald took up smoking in his twenties. Charlie kept up his habit until the age of 80, when he quit following an operation for an ulcer, after which he reportedly was never ill for eleven years (D.I. Scotney, “Still Active at 91,” *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: undated clipping from the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society)

²⁵ Frank Fillmore, “Retired Seaman”

Pondicherry, where the crew loaded “peanuts in the shell. Literally, there were peanuts everywhere.”²⁶ Locals rowed canoes laden with the peanuts up inland rivers to the Broadgarth, anchored in a cove. Time passed in a leisurely way, waiting for more peanuts to arrive. Macdonald made beautiful sketches of India, including one of the Broadgarth at Pondicherry. He also had time to soak up the local atmosphere, and in the 1960s Macdonald recalled,

I was standing by the rail one evening, idly watching the shoreline, when out of the brush there emerged a live tiger, a beautiful blond animal with dark stripes, which walked along the mile of sandy shore without a thought for man or its other enemies. This black and yellow striped cat against the jungle background in the evening was indeed a beautiful sight. I watched him turn at the end of the sand into the green beyond. There were no houses, no people or villages in sight.²⁷

It was quite a sight for a man who idealized unspoiled nature. In middle age, Macdonald would sculpt a life-size great cat in concrete, which remains to this day on the lawn of his Centreville home. A smaller table-size piece shows a fierce prowling tiger. Perhaps the vision of the tiger from Pondicherry inspired Macdonald in these works.

After weeks in Pondicherry and a short stop in Ceylon [Sri Lanka], the Broadgarth left India destined for Marseilles, where the peanuts were to be made into candy. By July 28 of 1902 Charlie was living in London, visiting museums by day and reading by night. A letter home written on August 11, 1902, reveals that Charlie saw the coronation of Edward VII. All of the excitement, pomp, and circumstance seem positively to have swept away Macdonald, even after all he had seen on his travels. Macdonald’s admiring description of the coronation betrays not a trace of the radical he would become. He wrote,

The king looked as his pictures show him and both he and the beautiful queen looked perfection, every inch a king and queen. How the people shouted and the street was singing the national anthem sounded fine too. Their majesties

²⁶ “Spots Large Tiger on Asian Travels,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 5 January 1965.

²⁷ “Spots Large Tiger on Asian Travels.”

were turning right and left and smiling, the king looking quite well and happy as he ought to be.²⁸

He had had his fill of seafaring now, and soon came back to Nova Scotia. It had been seven years.

Charlie did not stay home for long. Overcome with restlessness and perhaps still possessed by an ambition to trek across Canada, Charlie made his way to Vancouver by train and on foot. In British Columbia, Macdonald again made a living as a carpenter, this time repairing railway cars. He also painted signs, the only time he made money as an artist. Charlie gloried in the natural beauties of the West Coast, climbing mountains with the Alpine Club of Canada, and as always keeping books of watercolour sketches. From 1908 to 1910, he lived in Vancouver. Charlie joined the four-year-old Socialist Party of Canada, which espoused the collectivization of property, atheism, production for use, and the organization of workers, ideas in which Macdonald would believe for the rest of his life.²⁹

British Columbia hosted thousands of wandering young men from the East, and it made socialists out of many of them. It was the Socialist Party of British Columbia that, after absorbing several small Socialist Leagues in the the rest of Canada, became the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) in 1904. Ernest Winch, five years younger than Macdonald, found communism in Vancouver in 1910, influenced by “the day-to-day observation of Vancouver’s poor and unemployed, his first union experience, a change in his reading habits, encounters with socialist speakers.”³⁰ Roscoe Fillmore of Albert County, New Brunswick, had become a committed communist in his teens, but only in British Columbia in 1907 did he meet other communists and join the Socialist Party.

²⁸ Charles Macdonald, Letter to “sis”: 11 August 1902

²⁹ Laurette 6

³⁰ Peter Campbell, Canadian Marxists and a Search for a Third Way (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999) 34

Fillmore liked the SPC because its leaders were workers and autodidacts like him, and perhaps this is what made the party so attractive to Macdonald as well.³¹

Macdonald seems to have left Vancouver in 1910 and must have spent some time in the Coast Mountains and Nass River along the border with Alaska, judging from a sketchbook he made of the area. Soon Macdonald hopped the border into Alaska, working for the Mackenzie and Mann Railroad.³² Charlie built railbeds at first, but soon was building trails from secluded gold mines to the railroad. We have few accounts of Macdonald's western sojourn, but he did tell Frank Fillmore, "I had a close shave . . . I was working on a trail and a fellow came along carrying a bag over his shoulder. A big man, he threw the bag on the ground between us and it was then discovered that the bag was full of dynamite and loose caps. Those fellows had no respect for dynamite."³³ If Macdonald had died then, perhaps the only thing to survive him would have been his excellent sketchbooks.

Sometime in 1912, Macdonald returned to the Cornwallis area of Nova Scotia where he had been born. Why Macdonald left the West remains a rather mysterious matter. Graham Metson suggests that Macdonald's artistic bent would have led him home, for "painters are drawn to the Annapolis Valley because of its incredible quality of light."³⁴ Macdonald always had a way with lighting effects in his paintings, so Metson may be on to something. The closest Macdonald himself ever came to an explanation, however, was to joke that of all the places where he had travelled he had "liked B.C. best of all, would have stayed there, but couldn't get apples with flavor; came back to Nova Scotia for 'em."³⁵ Perhaps we can read Macdonald's homesickness between the lines. British Columbia did not feel like home; the apples did not even taste right.

³¹ Nicholas Fillmore, Maritime Radical: The Life and Times of Roscoe Fillmore (Toronto: between the lines, 1992) 44

³² "Concrete Man," The Atlantic Advocate, 1965

³³ Frank Fillmore, "Retired Seaman"

³⁴ Senn 51

³⁵ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: March 27, 1930, no. 13, vol. LIII, p.1

Back in Nova Scotia, Macdonald began to devote himself to concrete. How the impulse to popularize concrete came to Macdonald is somewhat obscure, but probably his work building roads and trails in British Columbia gave him practical experience with the material. In 1978 Macdonald's widow told an interviewer that "he [Charlie] worked in quite a bit of cement out there [the West Coast], and I think that's where he got his idea, out there."³⁶ Another attraction of the material may have been that very few people knew how to use it properly in the Annapolis Valley. Certainly, no one manufactured the stuff.³⁷ Macdonald had a great opportunity to be his own boss by virtue of a special skill, just as he had been as a ship's carpenter. Macdonald constructed a building out of reinforced concrete in Centreville, a small town just a very few miles north of Steam Mill along the Aldershot Road. The building, much enlarged, eventually would become Macdonald's home. At first, however, it was a small factory consisting only of the room that later would become the kitchen. Macdonald camped outside his factory in a tent. After adding the tiny cubicle that now serves as a powderroom, he at least had somewhere to sleep.

The first products of the little factory were concrete blocks and concrete pipe for the North Mountain Railroad that ran between Centreville and Somerset until CN Rail ripped up the tracks in the 1980s.³⁸ In spite of finding a market for concrete, Macdonald seems to have needed to supplement his income from the factory by doing odd jobs, at least at first. Fragmentary records from 1913 show Macdonald painting signs and carriages, sawing wood, and hauling gravel, as well as selling concrete pipes.³⁹ The outbreak of World War One in 1914 created a steady demand for concrete, which became an important war material. Civilian construction stagnated during the Great War, because

³⁶ Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview

³⁷ Pauline Alam et al. The Blue Cottage at Huntington Point, Freelab 2000, Faculty of Architecture, Dalhousie University (Halifax: unpublished, 2000) 3

³⁸ Frank Fillmore, "Retired Seaman"

³⁹ Charles Macdonald, "Barque F.S. Hampshire." The records appear in the same logbook containing Macdonald's account of his voyage from New York to South America, beginning just a few pages afterward.

of government requisitioning. After the war, a great backlog of building projects put off since 1914 gave rise to a building boom.⁴⁰ From 1914 onward, then, Macdonald had a more or less secure living.

Macdonald's neighbours ridiculed his strange factory, but he stuck to his guns. In 1916, Macdonald sent a local girl a photograph of the place along with a note that read, "Do you think this has some appearance of a house? Most everyone laughs at it." Mabel Meisner lived in Chipman Brook on the Fundy shore, the twelfth of the dozen children of fisherman James Albert Meisner and his wife Lila Jane.⁴¹ Not quite twenty herself, Mabel was more than twenty years younger than Charlie. Despite the difference in their ages, she soon married him in Kentville's Presbyterian Church. Perhaps because of Charlie's atheism or simply because of his poverty, the wedding was a somewhat casual affair. Charlie gave his bride a rolling pin as a wedding present and the newlyweds walked the four cold, January miles from the church back to Centreville.

The Macdonalds spent their first year of marriage living in a tent on the flat roof of the Centreville factory.⁴² After the year was out, though, Macdonald had exhausted his gravel pit in Centreville and he had to sell his Centreville property so he could buy a new site in Kentville. For the next year, the Macdonalds lived beside a gravel pit on the outskirts of Kentville in a hastily constructed shack.⁴³ True to his word, though, Charlie aimed at making his old Centreville factory into a house. He bought the place back in 1918. The Macdonalds set to work improving their home, and Mabel remembered it as having been hard work. In 1978 Mabel told Joan Kennedy that "the first cement he [Charlie] got was English cement and that was hard, harder than rock, 'cause when we put

⁴⁰ S.B. Hamilton, A Note on the History of Reinforced Concrete in Buildings (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956) 20

⁴¹ Laurette 8. Mabel Meisner Macdonald's name, like that of her husband, has been spelled in more than one way. "Mabel" sometimes appears as "Mable." "Meisner" sometimes appears as "Misner," and different branches of the family have adopted different spellings. All Meisners and Misners in Nova Scotia, Mabel included, descend from Caspar and Anna Elizabeth Meysener of Stolberg, Germany, who came to Nova Scotia in 1751 aboard the "Murdock."

⁴² Alam et al. 12

⁴³ Frank Fillmore, "Retired Seaman Still Drawing at 87"

the furnace in we tried to cut through the floors (laughs) and we had an awful job. It was so hard.”⁴⁴ In 1919 or 1920, the Macdonalds built a second storey onto their house, this time using Canadian cement in their concrete.

Despite their busy life in Centreville, the Macdonalds managed to travel extensively around the Maritimes on long camping trips, particularly in Cape Breton. Charlie made sketches, which often became paintings on the walls of the Centreville house. The house came to contain over a hundred finished canvasses and Charlie gave away countless others, often as wedding presents, selling only a very few.⁴⁵ As Charlie told Halifax Chronicle-Herald reporter Ken Miller in 1966, “I don’t paint to sell. I paint for myself.”⁴⁶ Macdonald in his youth had concentrated for the most part on pencil, pen and ink, and watercolour as media. After World War One, however, he turned out an increasing number of oil paintings, perhaps because he could now afford expensive oil paints and because he had the space to display and store canvasses.

Graham Metson has pronounced Macdonald “one of the best artists Nova Scotia ever produced,” and compared him favourably with Camille Pissarro.⁴⁷ It is high praise to place Macdonald in the company of Pissarro, the great Impressionist who was the disciple of Corot, the colleague of Monet, and the mentor of Cézanne. Pissarro, some forty-four years older than Macdonald, does seem interestingly similar to Macdonald as an artist. Like Macdonald at his best, Pissarro would “contemplate nature with fidelity, instead of trying to beautify it,” as John Rewald so ably puts it.⁴⁸ Pissarro and Macdonald both presented rural subjects simply and without affectation, painting their favourite places as they saw them. Pissarro did not become widely famous until Macdonald was already well embarked on his artistic career, so there is probably no

⁴⁴ Mabel Meisner Macdonald.

⁴⁵ Mabel Meisner Macdonald

⁴⁶ Ken Miller, “C. MacDonald, 92, An Artist in Oils, Sculpture in Cement” [sic]. The Chronicle-Herald [Halifax]: 19 January 1966, p. 14

⁴⁷ Senn 50

⁴⁸ John Rewald, Camille Pissarro (New York: Henry R. Abrams, 1966) 18

question of direct inspiration from the Impressionist. In his seafaring days, however, Macdonald made a pen-and-ink sketch called "In a Paris Café." If Macdonald was in Paris in the 1890s, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he saw paintings by Pissarro or like-minded artists who sold their paintings there. This is pure speculation, of course. In any case, Macdonald would only have found his artistic tastes confirmed in Pissarro's work; he had already established his artistic identity by his mid-twenties.

Pissarro honed his craft for many years, studying in Paris and elsewhere on a small but sufficient allowance from his wealthy parents. Macdonald, on the other hand, never gave himself over to art completely, although perhaps he would have liked to do so. The time and energy that Macdonald could devote to his art had their limits and his evident talents probably never developed fully. The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia described Macdonald's canvasses somewhat less favourably than did Metson, as "by and large falling into the school of 'Sunday' painting."⁴⁹ Macdonald certainly had his technical limitations as a painter. Never could he paint a car convincingly, for instance, and his perspective can be faulty.

Harping on Macdonald's technical limitations does not do justice to his oeuvre, however. Some of Charlie's paintings, like the effulgent oil "In Steam Mills" that shows his childhood home, show a keen sense for lighting effects. The hand-carved wooden frames that grace several of the paintings are notable too. In the case of "Bras d'Or Lakes, Cape Breton," for example, a frame featuring carved and painted red maple leaves accentuates the row of autumnal trees on the canvass. Macdonald's paintings also have historical interest in addition to their artistic interest. The Nova Scotia that Charlie documented was vanishing. Paintings like "Port Lorne on the Fundy Shore" and "Chipman Brook" provide a useful visual record of what many small Nova Scotian towns looked like before their docks fell to ruins and their roads were paved. As Annapolis Valley journalist Wendy Elliott has observed, "Fishermen no longer land at Port Lorne,

⁴⁹ Art Gallery of Nova Scotia 3

teams of oxen only plow at Ross Farm and the Trans-Canada Highway runs through Baddeck. Luckily Charlie recorded those scenes before they vanished forever.”⁵⁰

Speaking of her husband during the same interview, Mabel said that “I let him paint just what he wanted to, I didn’t say anything.”⁵¹ Throughout his life Charlie, as he said, would paint for himself. In one artistic endeavour, though, Charlie and Mabel did work together. Mabel showed great skill in making hooked rugs using the so-called “Waldoboro method.” Originating among fisherfolk in the coastal villages of Maine, the Waldoboro method gives sculptural texture to hooked rugs by building up a relief of raised areas of wool. The best Waldoboro rugs create a sense of deep three-dimensional space, and Mabel’s are very good indeed. Charlie had no talent for rug hooking, but his vivid pictorial sense let him collaborate with Mabel to create original designs for her rugs. Burglars stole many hooked rugs from Mabel’s summer cottage in the 1970s, but enough remain for us to appreciate her handiwork.

For the rug “Somerset” Charlie sketched a pattern onto a piece of burlap and Mabel made the rest of the rug “from men’s woolen winter underwear (Stanfield’s) dyed and then worked on [the piece of] burlap.”⁵² Typical of Macdonald’s artwork, the rug has been created with whatever came to hand. Also very much of a piece with Charlie’s larger oeuvre is the subject matter, a celebration of rurality. The small Kings County town of Somerset was the terminus of the North Mountain Railway and the rug depicts a small farmhouse in a pastoral landscape. “Somerset” remains at the Macdonald home in Centreville, although in light of the recent elevation of the hooked rug from the realm of craft to the realm of fine art it has been removed from the floor and hung on the wall. Several decades of people walking over the rug have flattened the relief a bit and dimmed

⁵⁰ Wendy Elliott, “An Appreciation of Vision,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: c. 1980. Clipping in the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society.

⁵¹ Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview

⁵² Frank Fillmore, Fillmore Photos and Cutlines

the once-bright colours, but the wear and tear are part of the history of “Somerset” and give it character.

In the estimate of Martine Jacquot, the greatest of the hooked rugs is “The Expulsion of the Acadians,” made in 1920 when Mabel was only twenty-two years old.⁵³ The rug depicts one of the saddest chapters of Nova Scotian history, one that unfolded at the village of Grand Pré, less than a half-hour’s drive from Centreville. By the Treaty of Utrecht in 1714, France ceded to Britain her colony Acadia, comprising all of mainland Nova Scotia. In spite of the treaty, Britain and France remained either at war or near to it for nearly fifty years. The French-speaking Acadians made up almost the whole of Nova Scotia’s population. British officials always feared that the Acadians would side with the French in a war, despite their protestations of neutrality. In 1755, with war raging between the two empires again, British Lieutenant-Governor Charles Lawrence elected to deport the Acadians from Nova Scotia. As one of the largest Acadian settlements, Grand-Pré became one of the main points of embarkation. “The Expulsion of the Acadians” shows Acadian villagers emerging from their homes, transfixed by the sight of the approaching British ships that will carry them into exile.

Since 1920, the eighteenth-century premonition of ethnic cleansing that was *Le Grand Dérangement* has received great commemoration and recognition in Kings County. At the time, however, the pioneering scholar John Frederick Herbin was only just bringing the tragedy into the regional consciousness. The Grand Pré National Historic Site was unbuilt. The most prominent statement on the Expulsion remained the nineteenth-century New Englander Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem *Evangeline*. The hooked rug of “The Expulsion” stands as an outstanding example of local comment on the terrible event. It is fitting that the University of Moncton, one of the great centres of historical scholarship on the Acadians, now houses “The Expulsion.”

⁵³ Martine Jacquot, “Un arrêt au musée Charles-Macdonald s’impose,” *Le Courrier de la Nouvelle-Ecosse*: 15 August 1997, p. 10

Between paintings and hooked rugs, the Centreville house contains much art. Indeed the house itself and its grounds are works of art too. Outside the Macdonald home is a sculpture garden, filled with pieces that Charlie made between 1920 and the 1940s. Concrete deer graze by the roadside, a concrete mountain lion prowls in the shadow of a wisteria bush, concrete toadstools spring from the lawn, and a beautiful concrete woman washes her hair over a concrete wash-basin (which does double-duty as a bird-bath). German architect Erich Mendelsohn once wrote that reinforced concrete embodies the “compression and tension” of the human body because of its plastic and dynamic qualities. Extending his metaphor, Mendelsohn identified the steel frame of reinforced concrete with the skeleton and the concrete itself with flesh.⁵⁴ With his sculptures Macdonald has made Mendelsohn’s analogy concrete, so to speak.

Mendelsohn must have been onto something, because Macdonald’s concrete statuary for the most part appear astonishingly lifelike. The deer look as though they might bolt across Aldershot Road at any moment. Credulous hunters used to shoot at them.⁵⁵ Frank Fillmore reported that his confused dog walked round and round a concrete fawn, sniffing at it suspiciously.⁵⁶ In the ultimate tribute to the verisimilitude of Macdonald’s creations, a flesh-and-blood deer once tried to coax a concrete statue of a deer at Macdonald’s Huntington Point cottage to go into the woods with it.⁵⁷ The western lawn of the Macdonald house in Centreville once hosted a whole herd of concrete deer, but time has thinned their numbers. Only four remain today.

⁵⁴ Kathleen James, Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997) 43

⁵⁵ T.H. Eaton, “Centreville – A Prosperous Kings County Community,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 13 January 1944, no. 2, vol. LXVIII, p. 8

⁵⁶ Frank Fillmore, “Fillmore Photos and Cutlines,” c. 1963, Dalhousie University Archives, DAL MS2.349.A.1. The file “Fillmore Photos and Cutlines” contains a collection of photograph negatives and captions to accompany them, compiled in preparation for a newspaper article on Macdonald. Fillmore’s comment that Macdonald’s age was “nearly 89” indicates that this unpublished archival material probably dates from the early spring of 1963.

⁵⁷ Collection of anecdotes in the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society

Following his usual *modus operandi*, Macdonald made his concrete sculptures without very much prior planning and using whatever came to hand. When asked how he went about constructing a concrete animal, Macdonald smiled and said, “you pile cement on and take it off – by and by you’ve got something.”⁵⁸ If Macdonald said anything else about his methods as a sculptor, it has not come down to posterity. It seems that he started with a skeleton of iron rods twisted together, created a body out of tin cans and chicken wire, and finally slapped on concrete to create an animal. All of the statues have many coats of paint on them. Painting the animals in appropriate colours increases their verisimilitude and it saves them from wind, rain, and ice. Weathering has indeed taken a toll on the animals, and the thin legs and antlers of the concrete deer seem particularly vulnerable.

Meaghan Parent speculates that Macdonald liked to sculpt animals because it gave them immortality.⁵⁹ Macdonald himself, though, allowed no such esoteric artistic motivation. In an interview with Frank Fillmore, Macdonald said, “actually, I got started in concrete statuary because I wanted to show what a man could do with concrete and I also thought it might make good advertising [for the concrete company].”⁶⁰ The sculptures did attract a great deal of local comment, but not all of it was positive. The sculpture of a woman washing her hair, made c.1930, excited local outrage because of her nudity, despite what Laurette characterizes as her “prurient pose.”⁶¹ Charlie, for his part, considered the woman washing her hair as one of his favourite pieces. An apocryphal story has it that, as a joke, Charlie sculpted her so she would look like one of Roscoe Fillmore’s daughters.

⁵⁸ Cyril Robinson and Glay Sperling, “Concrete House: A Rebel Against Modern Architecture Has Unusual Home,” The Standard Magazine [Montreal]: 21 July 1951

⁵⁹ Meaghan Parent, “The Tour of Charles Macdonald’s Concrete Home,” Unpublished manuscript in Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society Archives, 1999, p.2

⁶⁰ Frank Fillmore, “Retired Seaman Still Drawing at 87.”

⁶¹ Laurette 10

Charlie acquired a reputation as a jokester, and much about his Centreville home seems to reflect a sense of fun. Just outside the house, there is quite literally a “bed of roses.” Mabel was a keen gardener and cultivated an impressive rose bush in a flowerbed edged with concrete molded to look like an actual bed, complete with four-posters. The concrete “headboard” of the bed served as a trellis for the rose bush. Other whimsical touches around the house include a child’s handprints on a concrete windowsill, and in the living room a concrete hunting trophy made to look like the head of a deer.

In his house, Charlie has carried the use of concrete to the point of farce. Charlie made the bathtub (now, sadly, destroyed), the bookshelves, the umbrella stand, the hitching posts, the lawn furniture, the birdhouses, and even the ridiculously oversized clothesline pole (actually a parged tree trunk) out of concrete. Such a willful effort to avoid using any other material probably struck Charlie as funny. Not that Charlie lacked for method in his madness for concrete. In part, Macdonald wanted to test the limits of his chosen medium and to impress upon his friends and neighbours that the potential of concrete in fact had very few limits. In part Macdonald genuinely loved concrete, and was given to statements like “there’s real beauty in cement.”⁶² Mabel appears to have loved concrete a little less than did her husband. In 1951, two Montreal journalists reported that while Charlie rhapsodized over the virtues of concrete, his wife seemed “somewhat less enthusiastic” and wished for a little more wood around the place.⁶³ Little wonder: the bare concrete floor got so cold in the winter that Mabel’s friends pulled her hooked rugs over their toes, desperate for warmth.⁶⁴

As if its construction out of iron-reinforced concrete were not enough to make the house unusual, the Macdonalds’ Centreville home also had an odd architectural style. With Mediterranean touches, like its flat roof, long porte-cochere, and concrete stucco,

⁶² “MARRIED FIFTY YEARS” *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 20 January 1965.

⁶³ Robinson and Sperling, “Concrete House”

⁶⁴ Lorri Blanchard, “An Anecdote or two,” unpublished document in the Archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society, 1997.

and ornamental flourishes like tree-shaped columns, the house has often been seen as bush Antonio Gaudì, a rural Nova Scotian folk artist's take on the architectural vision of fin-de-siècle Barcelona's master builder. Wayde Brown and others have pointed out the affinity between Macdonald and Gaudì, and it is very real.⁶⁵ We must note, however, that the effect of the same architectural style in Gaudì's work and in Macdonald's work differs markedly. Gaudì's channeling of vernacular Mediterranean style asserts his rootedness in the Catalan culture of his native Barcelona.⁶⁶ For Macdonald, however, the channeling of Mediterranean architecture had precisely the opposite effect, asserting that he had moved beyond the culture in which he had grown up.

Charlie had become a radical and outspoken socialist after his British Columbian travels, which caused some friction in his Presbyterian family.⁶⁷ Mabel did not share her husband's political commitments. Her noted fondness for red, the colour in which she painted her kitchen, seems to have been entirely aesthetic and not political. Sometimes Charlie could exasperate her. Charlie's niece Eileen remembers that "when he got going and telling these fantastic stories, she would say, 'Now Charlie that's enough nonsense!' And he'd keep quiet."⁶⁸ In spite of such rebukes, Charlie did not keep quiet for long. Eileen Macdonald also remembers that Charlie would frequent the car dealership of his brother Ralph (Eileen's father-in-law) and hector the customers about socialism.⁶⁹

Macdonald did more than just talk about socialism, however, but he practiced it as best he could in his company. The new concrete factory went up near a gravel pit just outside Kentville, on the Brooklyn Road. The area was in Yoho, a name gentrified to the more sonorous "Meadowview" in the 1970s, a very small town founded by slaves who

⁶⁵ Wayde Brown, "Charles Macdonald's Modernism," Lecture, Charles Macdonald House Museum, Centreville, NS: 29 May 2001.

⁶⁶ Joan Bergós, *Gaudì, The Man and His Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994) 16

⁶⁷ Eileen Macdonald, Interview with Danielle Boudreau: 19 August 1997.

⁶⁸ Eileen Macdonald, Interview

⁶⁹ Eileen Macdonald, Interview

had escaped from Nova Scotia planters.⁷⁰ Macdonald's factory became Kentville Concrete Products, which operated until 1978 when a Dutch firm, Bouters, bought it out. Kentville Concrete Products only had a small workforce, Harley Hazelwood estimating it at between eight and ten men at any one time.⁷¹ All of the men who worked with Macdonald have died and the company records seem to have disappeared from Nova Scotia.

In spite of a dearth of official documentation, however, we do know a few things about Kentville Concrete Products. The company ran cooperatively, for the general benefit of all of its workers.⁷² By all accounts the workers benefited from the cooperative arrangement, apparently earning double the going wage and drawing from a savings fund to tide them over during winter (perennially a slack time for the construction industry).⁷³ Bob Farris, foreman at Kentville Concrete Products for thirty years, told a slightly different story in 1989. No one got wages as such, according to Farris, but instead the men "drew what we needed" from company coffers.⁷⁴

As for what Kentville Concrete Products manufactured, company advertising provides us our best guide. The advertising ran in *The Advertiser*, a "community journal" published in Kentville which remains chief newspaper of the Annapolis Valley to this day. Every week, Macdonald penned some short blurb that filled a small oblong rectangle of newsprint. Underneath the blurb, the words **KENTVILLE CONCRETE PRODUCTS** appeared in bold capitals. Regular weekly advertising seems to have begun in 1926 and continued to consist of Macdonald's squibs until 1946. Macdonald had

⁷⁰ Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, *The History of Kings County Nova Scotia, Heart of the Acadian Land* (Salem, MA: The Salem Press, 1910) 144.

⁷¹ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Personal Interview, 3 September 2001.

⁷² Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, *Charles Macdonald (1874-1967)*, 1980, p. 3 AGNS produced this booklet to accompany a retrospective exhibit of Macdonald's work.

⁷³ Alam et al. 12

⁷⁴ Patty Mintz, "Huntington Point's unique, old, 'fairy-tale cottages,'" *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 4 August 1989.

diverse interests and wrote about many of them, but at first he wrote mostly about the virtues of concrete in general and of his products in particular.

In spite of the smallness of the plant, Kentville Concrete made quite a variety of precast products: sewer pipe, half pipe, stove pipe, several kinds of concrete block, flues, septic tanks, furniture, culverts, well curbs, urns, lintels, sills, bird baths, balusters, gate posts, the list goes on. Most of the products listed above can of course be made with other materials. Concrete products had to compete with wooden, steel, or clay versions of the same things. Accordingly, Macdonald sang out the praises of concrete, insisting upon its superiority in every respect to every other material. One-sidedness sometimes led Macdonald into hyperbole. In 1928, Macdonald quoted a newspaper report proclaiming that steel culvert pipe would last a full fifteen years and then asserted that concrete pipe was even more durable, “good for 150 years perhaps 1500 years, at less per foot.”⁷⁵ The first patent for concrete pipe, filed in France by Joseph Monier, dates from 1872. With only fifty-six years of data to rely upon, Charlie must have chosen “150 years” and “1500 years” arbitrarily.

Macdonald had a larger belief in the longevity of concrete and that is what backs his claims for it. Concrete got “harder with age”⁷⁶ and so one should consider it “permanent.”⁷⁷ Macdonald rightly pointed out the durability of concrete, especially as compared to steel or to wood, he again he has exaggerated. Concrete does get harder over time because it becomes denser as it shrinks, but shrinkage also makes concrete crack. Water can seep into the cracks, making concrete crumble and making any iron supports rust out.⁷⁸ Exposure to the elements puts outdoor concrete work at particular risk to water damage, especially in a Nova Scotian climate which subjects Macdonald’s concrete

⁷⁵ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 2 August 1928, no. 31, vol. LI, p. 1

⁷⁶ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 4 October 1928, no. 40, vol. LI, p.1

⁷⁷ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 6 September 1928, no. 36, vol. LI, p.1

⁷⁸ Hamilton 29-30

legacy to many freeze-thaw cycles and countless rain-storms every year. The statues on the lawn of Charlie's Centreville home will exfoliate layers of concrete if left unpainted for a year or two.

Another of Charlie's favourite claims for the permanence of concrete was that a concrete house would not burn down as wooden houses so often did. Almost every enthusiast of concrete made a big deal out of its non-flammability, and Macdonald proved no exception. Reported a breathless Macdonald, "'Hottest fire in my experience,' said the fire chief. No damage except door and window," because the house was made of concrete.⁷⁹ Macdonald does exaggerate a little bit, because an exceptionally hot fire of over 300_C can substantially weaken concrete.⁸⁰ In any case, however, Macdonald did not carry any fire insurance on his Centreville home and felt no need of it.

Macdonald believed concrete the best material with which to build houses. Concrete lasted longer than wood, did not burn, and cost very little. Kentville Concrete Products sold hollow concrete blocks for eighteen cents apiece.⁸¹ Macdonald wanted people to follow his lead and to build their own concrete houses. Pointing out in 1965 that one of his concrete houses would cost only \$300.00 to build, he wondered "why do-it-yourselfers don't build their cottages of a like design."⁸² A kind of do-it-yourself spirit animated Macdonald's promotion of concrete. Charlie used to publish instructions on how to make things out of concrete in The Advertiser, like the right way to lay up blocks to build the outside wall of a house.⁸³

For Charlie, homeowners had a choice: "Going to build a lasting, substantial, economical home of concrete blocks for yourself, or a wooden merry-go-round for Old

⁷⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 18 October, 1928, no. 44, vol. LI, p.1

⁸⁰ Hamilton 25

⁸¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 9 June 1927, no. 23, vol. L, p. 1

⁸² Frank Fillmore, "Fillmore Photos and Cutlines." The house in question is the Teapot Cottage at Huntington Point.

⁸³ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 7 April, 1927, no. 14, vol. L, p. 1

Bill Up-Keep?”⁸⁴ Put this way, the question cannot have been difficult to answer. That most of Macdonald’s peers did not see things his way left him incredulous. “Have you stock in the insurance companies? Perhaps you have money in lumbering and milling?” Macdonald demanded.⁸⁵ Why else would anyone build a wooden house? The persistence of wooden construction seemed like decisive proof of the perfidy of capitalistic vested interests. In 1928 Macdonald only half-jokingly suggested “that wooden construction be taboo, favoring concrete.”⁸⁶

Kentville Concrete Products practised what Macdonald preached, building concrete homes for men who joined the firm.⁸⁷ The company would hold the deed and the man would make an annual payment. The generous Macdonald also built houses for people with no affiliation to Kentville Concrete. One of the beneficiaries was Roscoe Fillmore. By the time Fillmore moved his family to Centreville in 1924, the horticulturalist had run a Siberian collective farm, been president of the New Brunswick Fruit Growers’ Association, helped found the Workers’ Party, and written scores of articles promoting communism. He was also penniless. Fillmore’s politics had cost him his job managing New Brunswick’s largest orchard and he had come to Centreville to start over. Next door to the Macdonald home, Charlie and Roscoe built a greenhouse and concrete-block house where the Fillmores lived for the better part of forty years.⁸⁸

The Fillmores and the Macdonalds became close. The childless Macdonalds seem to have adopted the five Fillmore children as their own and regularly took them to the Kentville cinema, where Charlie could be depended upon to embarrass them by talking

⁸⁴ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 24 March, 1927, no. 12, vol. L, p. 1

⁸⁵ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 30 July 1936, no. 31, vol. LXIX, p. 5

⁸⁶ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 29 November, no. 48, LI, p. 1

⁸⁷ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Personal Interview

⁸⁸ Nicholas Fillmore 153

loudly during the film.⁸⁹ Fillmore children would slip through a hole in the same hedge to the Macdonald home to get cookies from Mabel, or help with their homework from Charlie. Then, inevitably, one of the children would “make too much noise” or “break something.” Charlie would chase them out of the house and stop up the hole in the hedge, using a piece of wood. After Charlie had cooled down and removed the barrier, the Fillmore children would know that Charlie had forgiven them and they would troop back over.⁹⁰ Roscoe and Charlie had similar political opinions, both having been members of the SPC. One unverifiable story has it that they had a wooden chest filled with illegal communist literature buried underneath the hedge between their properties.

The Annapolis Valley was not exactly a hotbed of socialist thought, but Roscoe and Charlie did become important members of a little Sunday discussion group, like so many others across the world. Across the English-speaking world, this was the golden age of Sunday meetings which attracted “priests, ministers, anarchists, Marxists, labourists . . . to debate everything from Christ to currency, Marx to margarine.”⁹¹ In the Annapolis Valley, the Centreville Socialists, as they called themselves, met at the Northville farm of Jim Simm to enjoy political discussion and Simm’s own apple cider. The women did not partake of either, leaving the men in the kitchen to pursue their own conversation in the living room. Canadian leftists like Tim Buck and Becky Buhay stopped in at Centreville Socialist meetings, probably attracted by Roscoe’s national profile in the Workers’ Party.⁹²

The Centreville Socialists was more than a Workers’ Party local, however. It is unclear whether Macdonald ever was a member of any party except the SPC, which had virtually ceased to operate after 1925. Poet and farmer Kenneth Leslie certainly was not

⁸⁹ Rosa (Fillmore) Skinner, Interview, 29 July 1997. A transcript of this interview can be found in the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society Archives.

⁹⁰ Jake McDonald, Telephone Interview: 29 May, 2001

⁹¹ Campbell 247, n. 1

⁹² Nicholas Fillmore 161. The Workers’ Party was the name for the outlawed Communist Party of Canada.

a Workers' Party member. Leslie was a Christian socialist who claimed, to the incredulity of many of his political associates, to have learned his socialism "at the First Baptist Church in Halifax."⁹³ For Leslie, no moral values had meaning except in a Christian context and no brotherhood of man could hope to succeed. Most Sunday discussion groups featured a diversity of opinion, and the Centreville Socialists was no exception.

If Macdonald was a different sort of socialist than Ken Leslie, what sort of a socialist was he? For the last sixty years of his long life, beginning in the British Columbia SPC and continuing in the Centreville Socialists, Macdonald studied "problems of production." In the Annapolis Valley, he had a reputation as a wild-eyed radical and consorted with the likes of the "Maritime Radical" Roscoe Fillmore. Macdonald has left posterity no sustained, coherent manifesto, so his precise opinions are rather difficult to gauge. What we know about his politics comes for the most part from advertisements, if we should call them advertisements, for Kentville Concrete Products. As often as not, Kentville Concrete Products' little square of newsprint in the weekly *Kentville Advertiser* contained not a word pertaining to concrete or its products. Macdonald felt great ambivalence about advertising and his dislike led him to mention concrete products less and less often in his submissions. Explained Charlie, "Through our contact with people we know you do not want us to extoll the virtues of our products – radio style – As for us, we speak of problems and events of, we hope, general interest."⁹⁴

Macdonald disliked conventional advertising, but loved the Soviet Union. "Life must have been pleasant in Soviet Russia before the war," mused Macdonald on Christmas Eve, 1942, in part because "No merchant's whiskered fraud with his tinsel and bells deluded the old folks at the end of a pagan year. No one to break in on the radio with lies about soap or lotions or pancakes or pink pills - no physiopathic drooling from

⁹³ Burris Devanney, "Kenneth Leslie: A Biographical Introduction," *Canadian Poetry*, No. 5, Fall/Winter 1979, p. 85

⁹⁴ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 24 April 1941, no.17, vol. LXIV, p.5

healers of all ills.”⁹⁵ Few indeed are the advertisers who decry advertising with only one shopping day until Christmas. Of course, a cement merchant could probably afford to criticize the commercialization of Christmas. Sales of septic tanks and well curbs were probably unaffected by the holiday season in any case.

Twenty-first-century Canadians accustomed to thinking of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian netherworld may puzzle over the devotion of Macdonald and many other Canadians to the USSR in the 1930s. Macdonald did not love the Soviet Union for forced collectivization or gulags, however, but for what he saw as an inspiring tale of unprecedented achievement against all odds. As far as Macdonald could tell on October 16, 1941, despite “a crippling legacy from Czarist days” and “world opposition and sabotage,” in twenty years “the Soviets have made a world record in education, agriculture, science, and in preparedness for eventual war which was being brewed by world-dominators.”⁹⁶ Despite a world committed to keeping it down because of its communism, the Soviet Union had outdone all other countries. The story must have been an inspiring one for Macdonald, a man who had suffered for his own communism.

Macdonald’s opinions about the USSR may strike us as naïve, but keep in mind that he probably had little reliable information about the country. Press coverage of the Soviet Union tended to be so inept that Macdonald could dismiss unflattering reports. We remember the Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939 as a humiliation for the Soviet military. The vastly outnumbered “brave little Finns” held out for months against the enormous, but poorly commanded, Red Army. For Macdonald, however, the news was delivered by demonstrably unreliable messengers: “It would be real embarrassing for an American war correspondent who had told the tall stories of Finnish prowess in the

⁹⁵ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 24 December, 1942, vol. LXVI, no. 51, p.5. Charlie’s sneer about the “pagan new year” probably refers to the ancient Roman decision to celebrate the birth of Christ, which was not known precisely, on such a day as to preempt heathen new year revels.

⁹⁶ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 16 Oct., 1941, vol. LXIV, no.42, p.5

Russo-Finnish War . . . [to] try to explain a Finn climbing a ‘fir’ tree in the Petsamo in the Petsamo district – where there are no trees – and shooting 57 Russians.”⁹⁷ The carelessness with facts that a Russophile like Macdonald noticed in the mainstream media’s Soviet reportage undermined their credibility. Macdonald instinctively distrusted it, even when its stories were true.

The treatment of the Soviet Union in most media outlets could provoke not only Macdonald’s scepticism and his ridicule, but also his anger. Macdonald often felt as though Canadian journalists wanted the Soviet Union to fail and to be humiliated. If the Soviet Union failed, it would discredit socialism and remove the threat of socialist revolution. After Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, however, Canada and the USSR faced a common threat. Some commentators continued to deride the Soviet Union, however, which enraged Macdonald. Reacting to a contemptuous article in 1941, Macdonald wrote,

Beverley Baxter writes in McLean’s, usual smart-aleck stuff, knows more about Russia than any Russian, and none of it good. It stinks to high heavens that this holocaust of youth should whet the cynicism and apparently further the welfare of the million or so disdainful vociferous Baxters, who really seem disappointed and mortified that Soviet Russia is holding the Germans so much better than the pride of Britain, France, and the rest of Europe.⁹⁸

Faced with many Canadians who feared and distrusted the Soviet Union, Macdonald concluded that people living in a capitalist country could not understand socialism without great imaginative effort. Charlie sadly concluded in 1945 that just as Spanish conquistadors in Peru could not understand Inca communal ownership, North American capitalists who worshipped “our reckless, suicidal freedom of action” could not understand communist Soviet Russia.⁹⁹ Macdonald did not blame ordinary Canadians for

⁹⁷ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 25 September 1941, vol. LXIV, no. 38, p.5

⁹⁸ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: October 9 1941, no. 41, vol. LXIX, p. 5

⁹⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: July 19 1945, no. 29, vol. LXXVIII, p. 5

their refusal to sing the praises of the Soviet Union. The Canadian media bore all of the guilt. The capitalist-owned press propagated “lies” about the USSR, and then “to dull your ears” it distracted readers with a bombardment of twaddle about sports, electoral jockeying, and “appliances which you will never own under their system.”¹⁰⁰ The only sensible policy was systematic avoidance and distrust of the capitalist press.

Macdonald trusted publications with links to Russia, like Sovietland, Northern Neighbours, and the Anglo-Soviet Journal, from which he quoted:

“A Peasant speaks: ‘Don’t worry brothers, the branches will grow again – the streets will be green again with trees. New beautiful cottages will rise up. Our daughters will plant the gardens with thyme and mint and sunflower . . . Our songs of freedom will be heard again, stronger, more beautiful, more loyal, across our new life – won forever in the fight against the bloody Fascists. It is inevitable. We are coming, brothers!’”¹⁰¹

The publication promised a USSR that was a peaceful, rural paradise, in which people would live in brotherhood. Class division and environmental despoliation upset Macdonald acutely and perhaps it was just too tempting to assume that Soviet writers told the truth about their country.

The real promise of the Soviet Union held for Macdonald was the healing of a deep rift in global capitalist society. Macdonald often wrote of a struggle between “Labor,” which he identified with communism, and “Capital,” which he identified with fascism. The opposition of Labor and Capital was a conventional one in communist circles. Tim Buck, probably Canada’s leading communist in these years, often spoke of world events in terms of Labor and Capital, for example.¹⁰² Particular class disputes were just incidents in the larger war. In 1937, Macdonald rashly declared that it was foolish to speak of conflicts between nations because “today a sharp line of cleavage

¹⁰⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 5 September 1946, no. 34, vol. LXIX, p. 5

¹⁰¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 9 April, 1942, vol. LXV, p. 5

¹⁰² See, for example, p. 205-210 of Buck’s Canada: The Communist Viewpoint (Toronto: Progress Books, 1948) in which he gives a history of Labor and Capital.

separates all countries into two – two Britains, two Frances – on one side labor, on the other side capital – both becoming international. No war between nations is possible.”¹⁰³ One could not speak of “France” but only of “French capitalists” and “French labor,” although labor eventually would triumph and the division would disappear. The great example of triumphant labor was the Soviet Union, in which “the government – the political power and the economic power of Soviet Russia, is one. That country speaks as one.”¹⁰⁴ Divided global society could find unity through communism.

The labor/capital dichotomy led Macdonald to formulate conspiracy theories. Capitalist conspiracies, insidiously hidden in plain sight, fooled ordinary folk into supporting fascism and suppressed socialist voices. How to explain the dearth of leftist analysis of the Spanish Civil War in the Nova Scotian media? Look no farther than the “capitalist-Fascist controlled radio and other agencies in Germany, Britain, the U.S. and Canada” aiding the “Fascist Franco propaganda lie machine.”¹⁰⁵ In truth, there was less overt support of Franco in the Canadian media than silent indifference to the war. Certainly, readers of *The Advertiser* would have learned virtually nothing about the Spanish Civil War on a weekly basis, unless they happened to glance down at Macdonald’s tiny, furious squibs. Stories about the U.K. and the U.S. dominated international news coverage. It was, however, probably more gratifying for Macdonald to believe that silence about the war was not torpid indifference to an issue he cared about deeply, but rather an organized conspiracy of silence that he was brave enough to break.

As organized entities, global capital and global labor were not sociological abstractions but active forces that commanded the allegiance of all people. Macdonald challenged newspaper readers, “Do you read and support the Labor press – and vote for

¹⁰³ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 11 March, 1937, vol. LX, no. 10, p.5

¹⁰⁴ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 13 June, 1946, vol. LXIX, no. 23, p.5

¹⁰⁵ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 1 April, 1937, vol. LX, no. 13, p.5

your cause? This is courage rare!”¹⁰⁶ One had to take sides. Having sided with Labor, Macdonald urged others to do the same.

Macdonald believed that the evil of modern Capitalism extended farther than its exploitation of Labor. Mass culture, consumerism, and urbanisation represented only environmental destruction, waste, and human degradation for Charlie. If it were not for his quasi-religious belief in Science (often capitalized), praise for new technologies, and advocacy of revolutionary social change, one might be tempted to say that Charlie had a pronounced tendency towards anti-modernism. Macdonald did not see the future merely as the amplification of the present, but as something altogether different. Rather than expecting larger cities, Macdonald wanted an end to what he thought of as defects in the economy that made cities necessary at all. Capitalism was the problem, and so long as it existed, the future would never arrive. Charlie even feared that large-scale capitalism might destroy human civilization.

Charlie, as befit a socialist, considered capitalism an incredibly inefficient economic system, one that needed to use up unsustainably large quantities of natural resources in order to sustain itself. In 1935, Macdonald warned that Nova Scotians “are busily wasting wood. There is no order or system in cutting timber . . . Much more ‘boom’ times, and there won’t be even wood for hockey sticks.”¹⁰⁷ The concrete-booster in Charlie thought of wood as a symbol of backwardness. Beyond concrete chauvinism, Charlie had real concerns with the way that Nova Scotians ran their economy. Celebrating economic growth for its own sake led to deforestation and the more deforestation the better the economy performed by their standards. Nova Scotians might use up all of their resources without even realizing they had done so, in part because no

¹⁰⁶ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 9 January, 1936, vol. LXIX, no. 2, p.5

¹⁰⁷ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Nov. 27, 1935, no. 45, vol. LXVIII, p.5

rational planner was directing economic activity, but ultimately because environmental considerations never entered into the calculations of most businesspeople.

Ten years after his warning about wasting wood, Charlie declared himself against full employment, an economic Holy Grail for many Canadians with bad memories of Great Depression unemployment. Writing to Nova Scotia's Minister of Industry, Charlie asked him to "visualize for a moment . . . [full employment] would fell every tree in our forests, and wipe out wild game; it would waste the world's oil supply and eventually bring stagnation."¹⁰⁸ As E.F. Schumacher would say thirty years later, infinite growth in a finite system is impossible. Beyond his concern that full employment in a society of mass production would not be sustainable, Charlie's letter also reveals an almost palpable frustration with people like the Minister of Industry who never thought about the environmental impact of industry as something tragic in itself.

Perhaps it was his great love for the great outdoors that led Macdonald to be so very concerned with environmental degradation long before such a concern was fashionable and long before people like David Suzuki gave it intellectual respectability as an economic doctrine. After a four-day canoe trip up the Gaspereau River, Charlie exulted, "swimming, looking at scenery, and eating blueberry flapjacks. Yowsah!"¹⁰⁹ At home in Centreville, Charlie maintained a small "wildlife sanctuary" on land nearby his house. Charlie always loved best those places, still numerous in rural Nova Scotia, "where nature is left alone."¹¹⁰ These are the places celebrated in Macdonald's art. Charlie's paintings run overwhelmingly to landscapes, many conceived on the long sketching and camping trips to Cape Breton's Cabot Trail that he and Mabel took regularly in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps the most appealing of Macdonald's sculptures are the very life-like deer that still grace the lawn of his Centreville home. Urban subjects

¹⁰⁸ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 11 January 1945, no. 2, vol. LXVIII, p. 5

¹⁰⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville Concrete Products. 28 June 1934, vol. LVIII, no. 26, p. 5

¹¹⁰ Senn, "Charles MacDonald, painter, is finally discovered."

never obtruded upon Charlie's art after his days as a sailor, when he often made watercolours of the exotic port cities in which he found himself.

While Macdonald had a deep and sincere horror of environmental degradation, we should not mistake Macdonald for a twenty-first-century environmental activist lost in the 1930s. Charlie enjoyed hunting and eating deer as well as sculpting them. A keen sport fishermen too, Charlie grumbled over regulations to protect fish stocks ("Another gentleman's law. No April fishing."¹¹¹) While appreciating the natural beauty of a place like Kings County's picturesque Cape Blomidon, Charlie thought it could do with "a scenic highway around the cliff."¹¹² Charlie seems to have heard of few mega-projects he did not like, whether it was cutting a canal through the Isthmus of Chignecto¹¹³ or blasting a highway through the North Mountain to Hall's Harbour to let the "hot air" out of the Valley in summertime.¹¹⁴

Environmental destruction was fine if it served some purpose. What Charlie opposed at every opportunity was "waste," generally identified with the production of consumer goods. Possibly Charlie felt the inspirational tug of the Soviet Union, which under Stalin devoted far more resources to megaprojects of questionable value, like the Volga-White Sea canal, than to the 'wasteful' production of articles of personal comfort. Charlie deplored both "denuding the forest to make paper, to describe the activities of ball, football, curling, and golf players"¹¹⁵ and the cutting of timber to make "a happy

¹¹¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 7 March 1929, no. 10, vol. LII, p. 1

¹¹² Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 19 July, 1934, no. 29, vol. LVII, p. 7.

¹¹³ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 18 July 1946, no. 29, vol. LXIX. Schemes to cut a channel from the Bay of Fundy to the Gulf of St. Lawrence have floated through the Nova Scotian imagination since the 1820s, and Sir Charles Tupper secured a promise, never fulfilled, to build such a canal as a condition for Nova Scotia's joining Canada.

¹¹⁴ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 6 July 1944, no. 16, vol. LXVII.

¹¹⁵ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 15 June 1944, no. 24, vol. LXVII.

New Year – in billions of letters – waste - .”¹¹⁶ Macdonald worried that people used resources without any rational purpose, and that such foolishness could have terrible consequences if multiplied billions of times over.

His concern for rational use of resources could tempt Charlie into playing the role of national scold, sounding like a killjoy who could not keep his nose out of other people’s affairs. Perhaps we may excuse Charlie’s propensity for impolitic finger wagging as the risk run by anyone who wants to change the way people live. While clearly hungering for people to listen to him, Charlie’s dream was not to be a national inquisitor with authority to change the lifestyle of other people. Charlie wanted a central authority to direct resources into sensibly chosen channels, and projected this wish onto what he called “technocracy.” In the twenty-first century the word “technocracy” carries unpleasant connotations of the absolute rule of unaccountable and unfeeling experts, but for Charlie it meant “science applied to social production and distribution, everywhere in everything, no overproduction, no underconsumption, no need to lie, cheat, or steal – to live.”¹¹⁷

In the 1930s, technocracy named an American plan to end the Depression by central direction of the economy and its advocates made extravagant claims. Technical experts would run the national economy. Experts would increase efficiency by, amongst other things, eliminating waste, avoiding the duplication of services, and outlawing the hoarding of money. So efficient would be the technocrats’ scientific scheme of production that the workforce could shrink until it included only able-bodied adults between 25 and 45 (which would release the 58-year-old Charlie from his labours). The workweek could shrink to four days and the workday to four hours. Macdonald waxed

¹¹⁶ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 15 Feb. 1945, no. 8, vol. LXVIII.

¹¹⁷ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. Advertiser. 5 January, 1933, vol. LXVI, p. 1

even more sanguine, reckoning that one hour of work every day would do.¹¹⁸ Even working sixteen-hour weeks, claimed the technocrats, every family could be given \$20 000 per year.¹¹⁹ Colin McKay, writing in 1933, considered the scheme “full-fledged state capitalism” and a big step towards in the evolution towards socialism, although not actually an ideal system in itself.¹²⁰

Many criticisms of the scheme aimed not so much at its intrinsic merits, but at the very quality that attracted men like Macdonald and led McKay to a somewhat grudging defense of the plan: the scheme smacked of socialism. Howard Scott, the leading technocrat, had belonged to the IWW and was a cement mixer rather than an economist. Charlie, for his part, defamed an unnamed college professor who had dismissed technocracy by saying the academic was obviously “tainted with the ‘Judas money’ he gets from capitalist sources.”¹²¹ Charlie thought of capitalism as a global conspiracy that tainted everyone that it touched. Anyone who opposed radical social change must be a stooge of monied interests.

Only a month before his tirade against the professor who doubted technocracy, Macdonald had written that capitalism “has strengthened its crumbling defences” by “buying” universities and “perverting” education.¹²² Macdonald had left school at fifteen, and could never realize a dream of going to art school which he had cherished during his time at sea.¹²³ Perhaps Macdonald’s own disappointment fueled an envy of people who had enjoyed more educational opportunities than he had. Jonathan Rée

¹¹⁸ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. 23 April 1936, vol. LXIX, no. 17, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ Colin McKay, “Labour and the Technocrats.” Feb. 1933: 149; 156-157. 149.

¹²⁰ Colin McKay 157. “State capitalism” is a Marxist term, naming the final stage of capitalist development before progress to socialism. Under state capitalism, the state apparatus would control the economy and allocate resources to its citizens. Socialism would smash the state apparatus, and people would have their share of resources as a human right, not because the state gave it to them

¹²¹ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 23 March 1933, no. 12, vol. LVI, p. 1.

¹²² Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. Kentville, NS. 2 Feb. 1933, no. 4, vol. LVI. p. 1

¹²³ Laurette 4

observes that many autodidacts took a “bullish pride” in their own efforts at self-education and resented those who had come by learning conventionally.¹²⁴

Macdonald had a right to be proud of his self-education, and in 1933, he boasted that he had studied “problems of production” for twenty-five years.¹²⁵ He saw his learning as security in a world where knowledge was power and ignorance could have political consequences. Macdonald complained that “intellectual bullies” have “led, cajoled, persuaded us whose intellectual powers have been dulled by heavy toil, into working hard so the ‘few’ have everything.”¹²⁶ Ignorant people fell prey to unscrupulous exploiters who fooled them into accepting an iniquitous social and economic position.

Working people had to become savvy enough to see through the lies told them by educated hucksters who would say anything for money. And make no mistake, the very process of formal education tended to make students into agents of the ruling class for life. In Charlie’s estimation, the wealthy owned the education system and used it to co-opt bright students. “Born and raised in the working class – and educated out of it . . . no more tragic words can be penned,” he pronounced.¹²⁷ Some might see such a system as a healthy meritocracy, but for Macdonald it was a system of corruption.

Jonathan Rée in his study of British autodidacts, *Proletarian Philosophers*, notes that socialists have tended to see education as “a method of enslavement” and at the same time “the way to a cultural treasure-house.”¹²⁸ Macdonald tempered his hatred of formal education with a great enthusiasm for self-education, especially working-class self-education. While Charlie probably would find nothing wrong with the notion that

¹²⁴ Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 8

¹²⁵ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. *The Advertiser*. Kentville, NS. 5 Jan., 1933, no. 1, vol. LVI, p.1

¹²⁶ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. *The Advertiser*. Kentville, NS, 1 Dec. 1932, no. 48, vol. LV, p. 5.

¹²⁷ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. *The Advertiser*. Kentville, NS, 25 January 1945, no. 4, vol. LXVIII, p. 5.

¹²⁸ Rée 5

education opened the doors to a “cultural treasure-house,” his own advocacy of education was more pragmatic than aesthetic. The uneducated were easy prey to the reified conspiratorial monster that Charlie called “Capital.” He even accused the Nova Scotia government (on no credible grounds, it should be emphasized) of fostering illiteracy to make its citizens more compliant. Education was self-defence.

Everyone, “especially workers,” should seek “wide, general knowledge by reading, by study,” advised Charlie. An intensive period of study in a coherent direction would be preferable to a diffuse, attenuated program. “Analyze, classify, pigeon-hole the valuable and reject the non-essential,” was Macdonald’s credo.¹²⁹ Wide knowledge in itself did not count as education for Charlie. Too much knowledge could be a bad thing, explained Charlie, saying of “minds like a sponge soaked with brilliant sayings of famous people” that “This is memory, not education or knowledge. A mental enema is indicated.”¹³⁰ One had to be careful about what one learned.

Knowing the truth meant knowing “science,” because “a scientific fact does not become outmoded like a piece of machinery – or change color to match the vagaries of a passing ‘Elmer Gantry.’”¹³¹ The quotation shows with particular clarity Charlie’s substitution of science for the religious truths peddled by Elmer Gantries as the key to an understanding of the cosmos that could transcend both human “vagaries” and time itself. Macdonald was the grandson of a Presbyterian minister, but heatedly opposed religion as the backward, superstitious, and violent domain of prejudice. Luckily, science beckoned as an alternative. After cataloguing crimes committed in the name of religion (“Who burned ‘witches’ in Salem?”) Charlie enjoined his readers, “study . . . EVOLUTION.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 28 August 1941, no. 34 vol. LVII, p. 5

¹³⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 14 February 1929, no. 7, vol. LII, p. 1

¹³¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 13 December 1934, no. 50, vol. LVII, p. 1

¹³² Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 27 December 1934, no. 52, vol. LVII, p.1

Studying evolution has proven a contentious subject, especially since the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in which a small-town Southern schoolteacher ran afoul of his community by teaching Darwin's theory of evolution to schoolchildren. Evolution seems to contradict the Creation story in the Book of Genesis and so many Christians have opposed the theory as inimical to their faith. For atheists like Charlie and Roscoe Fillmore, evolution provided decisive proof that churches taught nonsense. More than just a scientific theory, evolution symbolized a much larger cultural struggle.

In 1934, the year that Macdonald recommended the study of evolution and warned Kentville about Elmer Gantries, a great controversy erupted in Canada over a new high school textbook on world history by V.P. Seary and Gilbert Paterson entitled The Story of Civilization. The book outlined the theory of evolution. In the very first paragraph, shocked Creationists read that "Scientists through many years have brought together our present knowledge of what we are and whence we came."¹³³ Lest any student should doubt the cosmological implications of the sentence, a footnote at the bottom of the page informed readers that "many persons do not accept the findings of the scientists concerning man's origin and early history. They accept instead the account of creation given in the Book of Genesis."¹³⁴ Either one accepted science and evolution on the one hand, or religion and the Bible on the other. Seary and Paterson had chosen evolution, and described *The Origin of Species*, not the Bible, as the "book which has probably had a greater influence on the trend of human thought than any other."¹³⁵

Enraged Christians across Canada attacked *The Story of Civilization*. Dr. Alexander Murray of Sydney, Nova Scotia, complained that the book "contained a dogmatic declaration that man had come from brute ancestry."¹³⁶ Evolution reduced humans to just another animal, rather than God's creation in his own image whom He had

¹³³ Victor Perrin Seary and Gilbert Paterson, The Story of Civilization, Ill. C.V. Collins (Toronto: Ryerson, 1934) 1

¹³⁴ Seary and Paterson, p.1, n.1

¹³⁵ Seary and Paterson 172

¹³⁶ Nicholas Fillmore 174

appointed to rule wisely over the world. Petitions condemning *The Story of Civilization* circulated, especially in the Presbyterian Church. Roscoe Fillmore defiantly praised the book as properly reflecting “man’s discoveries and achievements,” and therefore a great advance on the “pack of lies and jingo ravings” that he felt constituted the high school history curriculum at that time.¹³⁷ Macdonald agreed with his neighbour and went against his family’s church to support *The Story of Civilization* as “the only ‘real’ history ever in the common schools. One up Science.”¹³⁸ Man did in fact have brute ancestry. The proof lay in “the malicious mischievousness of children and the young of the ape” which “has no parallel in nature.”¹³⁹

Science had such power for Macdonald, Fillmore, and many others of their time, because thinkers like the “social Darwinist” Herbert Spencer believed that it could shape human behaviour for the better. Belief in science went hand in hand with a belief in human perfectibility. Charlie insisted that education on scientific principles could prevent “poverty, alcoholism, crime and war,” if only hidebound traditionalists and capitalist flacks would stop opposing science.¹⁴⁰ Many communists, particularly the Soviets for whom Macdonald had such admiration, thought much the same way about history, science, and inevitable progress. Marx had discovered scientific laws that governed history in much the same way as Newton’s laws governed physics and Darwin’s laws governed biology, and Marx’s laws revealed that human history would end in an egalitarian paradise. In the last analysis, Marx’s teachings were even more authoritative than the findings of natural science; Leon Trotsky rejected quantum physics because he supposed the theory to be at odds with Marxism. Whether or not history does move in a scientifically discoverable direction is a question beyond the scope of this

¹³⁷ Nicholas Fillmore 174

¹³⁸ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 15 November 1934, no. 46, vol. LVII, p. 5

¹³⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 10 January 1935, no. 2, vol. LVIII, p. 7

¹⁴⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 22 November 1934, no. 47, vol. LVII, p. 1

paper – although we who live in the post-Cold War era might do well to remember with Peter Campbell that “history has not ended, claims to the contrary notwithstanding.”¹⁴¹

Whether or not history really does move according to some evolutionary program, many people believed in progress on a cosmic scale and Macdonald was one of them. Macdonald believed so passionately that he tried to tell everyone the good news in print at least once a month. Macdonald really believed that all of human history, animated by the force of science, was racing towards a triumphant end. Science was not just a way of understanding the natural world, not just an enlightening influence on human behaviour, but an immanent force that animated history. It all made sense to Charlie, who reasoned that science makes gas, cars and trucks – “Well, what about History?”¹⁴² Jonathan Rée muses that autodidacts by their life experience were predisposed to favour doctrines of social and historical progress. Self-education had raised them “by their own efforts, from a crabbed, superstitious, and fearful parochialism to a bold and oceanic vision, in which the infinite universe could be grasped as a whole. Surely this individual betterment could be repeated on a social scale.”¹⁴³

Orlando Figes, who has studied the appeal of socialism to Russian workers, also looks to the autodidact’s life experience and psychology in explaining the popularity of socialism among workers. Socialism offered a way of explaining just about any aspect of human history or society according to a schematic of class warfare, a very useful service to people who felt they had to catch up to more fortunate and better-educated people.

Writes Figes,

When people learn as adults what they are normally taught in schools, they often find it difficult to progress beyond the simplest abstract ideas. These tend to lodge deep in their minds, making them resistant to the subsequent absorption of knowledge on a more sophisticated level. They see the world in black-and-white terms because their narrow learning obscures any other

¹⁴¹ Campbell 30

¹⁴² Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 29 November 1934, no. 48, vol. LVII, p.1. As the passage illustrates, Macdonald did not separate science and technology.

¹⁴³ Rée 9

coloration. Marxism . . . gave them a simple solution to the problems of 'capitalism' and backwardness without having to think for themselves.¹⁴⁴

A vulgar Marxism provides a universalizable conspiracy theory to its adherents that lets them evacuate the specific content of any debate and re-cast it in terms of the political and social affiliations of the participants. Nicolas Krassó diagnoses the tendency to interpret any debate or event in light of class conflict as epidemic among socialists in the early twentieth century, and he dubs it "sociologism." In the grip of sociologism, "class struggle becomes the immediate, internal 'truth' of any political event, and mass forces become the exclusive historical agents."¹⁴⁵ Sociologism offers the other side of Figes's point. If the narrowly educated have a predisposition to interpret the world in a Manichean, "black-and-white" dualism, then socialism contains the potential for such a worldview within itself.

Perhaps talk about the peculiar experience of turn-of-the-century autodidacts and the potential of socialism to spawn conspiracy theories should be advanced with caution. How would Figes or Rée feel if Macdonald and Fillmore said that their theories say more about their status as academics than they do about them? Patronizing knowledge professionals gently belittle the intellectual achievements of autodidacts as coarse and unsubtle, perpetuating their own authority as cultural arbiters. Worse still, perhaps the academics have taken "Judas money," as Charlie put it. Their own position as salaried professionals may make academics dismiss indictments of capitalism as paranoid ravings. Nor need it be conscious bribe taking. Few of their critics would accuse Charles Macdonald or Roscoe Fillmore of intentionally seeking to become intellectually stunted

¹⁴⁴ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996) 120.

¹⁴⁵ Nicolas Krassó, "Trotsky's Marxism," *New Left Review* 44, 1967, 64-86. p.72. Krassó clearly disapproves of sociologism for its tendency to distort all attempts at communication. The influence of "sociologism" in the thought of Trotsky and Stalin in particular fatally compromises their usefulness as theoreticians, in Krassó's opinion. We ought to mention, however, that Krassó does not mean his comments on sociologism as an indictment of all Marxism, which he believes quite capable of genuine commentary on a variety of issues.

scandal mongers. Their life experience led them to such a position. Regardless of why Macdonald held the views he did, his brand of Marxism did indeed try to reduce all debates to class warfare.

In 1927 Macdonald jumped into an ongoing debate on the standardized federal inspection of Nova Scotia apples, to assure their quality. A report released in April by the horticulturalist W.A. Middleton, on "The Marketing of Nova Scotia Apples in Great Britain," had recommended government inspection as an aspect of a larger effort at cooperative marketing.¹⁴⁶ Macdonald always supported cooperatives, and recommended Middleton's report in print on April 14.¹⁴⁷ Throughout the spring and summer, interest in inspection grew.

In contrast, a local fruit grower named Herbert Oyler thought that the inspection plan would do no good. On July 28, The Advertiser published a Letter to the Editor from Oyler, entitled "The Other Side of the Inspection Story." Inspection would cost \$5.00 per train car, more than depressed growers in a price-competitive industry could afford. The fruit companies would already have inspected the apples before they shipped them to warehouses where they would be inspected. Most growers packed apples at their own farms and inspectors at warehouses would have to unpack them, inspect them, and then re-pack them at great expense. Canadian inspection certificates would have no currency with the British buyers who took most of Nova Scotia's crop and who still would insist on inspecting the apples themselves. Oyler, clearly well-versed in the apple business, makes a very reasonable sort of argument, to the effect that the inspection scheme would not help small growers serving an overseas market.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ W.A. Middleton, "The Marketing of Nova Scotia Apples in Great Britain," The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 14 April, 1927, no. 15, vol. L, p.3

¹⁴⁷ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 14 April, 1927, no. 15, vol. L, p.1

¹⁴⁸ Herbert Oyler, "The Other Side of the Inspection Story," The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 28 July, 1927, vol. L, no. 30, p.4

The next week, another letter to the editor denounced Oyler. The article appeared under the name “SNIFF’S SNUFF?” but its jocular tone, slightly awkward phrasing, use of rhetorical questions, class-consciousness, and accusatory language are typical of Charlie. The letter goes on for several paragraphs, but its argument boils down to an *ad hominem* attack: “Is Herbert Oyler writing as a very extensive fruit grower or as a speculator? Could he reason on the fruit industry other than as a speculator?”¹⁴⁹ The attack aims not at Oyler’s letter, but at Oyler himself. The specifics of Oyler’s argument do not matter, because Oyler could not deal objectively with apple inspection. The whole of Oyler’s reasoning would proceed from his position as President of Herbert Oyler Limited, which Oyler had claimed in his own letter in order to highlight his knowledge of the industry. SNIFF’S SNUFF makes up for knowing very little about agriculture or commerce by slotting Oyler into a schema that pitted parasitic capitalists (like speculators) against the virtuous producers (like farmers) whom they exploited.

Macdonald, as Rée might have suggested, thought he stood on the cusp of some important historical event. Millenarianism coursed through Macdonald’s veins, and he seems to have been given to apocalyptic pronouncements – at least in print. A final confrontation between capitalism, incarnated by Nazi Germany in Charlie’s opinion, and socialism, incarnated of course by the Soviet Union, was in the offing. Not that socialists would start a war: “We live to see working-class Soviet Russia become the arbiter of world peace . . . War will come from fascism.”¹⁵⁰ Still, Macdonald never doubted that only violent upheaval could bring forth the future. There could be no “pink” or “radical” half-measures but only out and out communism.

¹⁴⁹ SNIFF’S SNUFF, Letter to the Editor, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 4 August, 1927, vol. L, no.31, p. 4

¹⁵⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 4 April, 1935, no. 12, vol. LXVIII, p. 1

The pronounced support that Canadian communists gave to the Soviet Union angered many of their fellow citizens. A 1946 article entitled "Who are the Communists?" that Macdonald probably would have read in *The Advertiser* accused Canadian communists of looking to "Russia" as their "spiritual home" rather than to Canada.¹⁵¹ The writer marks out Communists as potential traitors. The Canadian government agreed, keeping Roscoe Fillmore, Charles Macdonald, Kenneth Leslie, and Jim Sim under continuous RCMP surveillance from the 1930s into the 1960s, after a sharp-eyed officer spotted a portrait of Lenin in the Fillmore living room.¹⁵²

Making the USSR into the "spiritual home" for communists the world over was indeed a stated goal of the Soviet Communist Party. Lenin hoped and expected that socialist revolutions would sweep the world in the wake of Russia's October Revolution in 1917.¹⁵³ Long after the initial flush of victory had faded, Soviet communists kept hoping that their own revolution would inspire imitators across the globe. Even Joseph Stalin, denounced as an isolationist by critics like Leon Trotsky, harangued a conference of industrial managers that "we must march forward in such a way that the working class of the whole world, looking at us, may say 'This is my vanguard . . . this is my working-class state, this is my fatherland.'"¹⁵⁴

The importance of Soviet inspiration for Canadian socialists should not be overemphasized. The Socialist Party of Canada, the Social Democratic Party, and their various antecedents, had commanded strong followings in Canada long before the Bolshevik Revolution. Tim Buck, pointing out that Canada had her own homegrown socialist tradition, wrote, "the assertion that communism is an alien idea imported to this

¹⁵¹ R. Gilmore, "Who Are the Communists?" *The Advertiser*, Kentville, NS: 11 April, 1946, vol. LXIX, no. 15, p.12

¹⁵² Nicholas Fillmore 196

¹⁵³ Vladimir Ilich Lenin, "Speech to the Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the Russian Communist Party, March 7, 1918," *Lenin on Politics and Revolution: Selected Writings*, Ed. James E. Connor (New York: Pegasus, 1968) 244

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Stalin, "The Tasks of Business Executives," 4 February, 1931. *Leninism: Selected Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1942) 201

country from the USSR is nonsense – malicious and calculated, but nonsense just the same.”¹⁵⁵ Canadian social conditions, not romantic revolutionism borrowed from the Soviet Union by radical tourists, had inspired Canadian socialists. On the other hand, the Soviet Union exercised great influence and sometimes even direct control over Canadian communist parties. Buck himself won the leadership of the Workers Party in large part because the Soviet-controlled Communist International decreed that he rather than Jack MacDonald should be leader.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps in light of the avowed purpose of Soviet communists to inspire people in other countries to topple their governments, and in light of the identification of many Canadian communists with the Soviet Union, one can find a justification for Canadian government repression of domestic communists. Finding a justification for spying on communists, banning their publications, and outlawing their parties is not the same thing as saying such measures were good. Macdonald, Fillmore, and Sim were not traitors and it is truly dismaying that their own country persecuted them. Canada did not make herself easy for these men to love. In the 1960s, Fillmore considered moving to Communist China to die and actually did live in the Soviet Union in 1923. Considering the abuse he endured for his belief over his lifetime, one can hardly blame Fillmore. Charlie may have felt similar impulses and then had to reject them. In 1927 Charlie asked “Why be chased out of your home country, [that] you have helped to build? You cannot escape the system under which we try to exist, go where you will. Stay here, study and fight.”¹⁵⁷ Macdonald wanted to live in a different Canada, not in a different country. Charlie would make the life he wanted to live for himself in Nova Scotia.

Charlie did not doubt that he would succeed in changing his country, for he considered himself on the right side of history. He was in the vanguard of global progress,

¹⁵⁵ Buck 190

¹⁵⁶ Nicholas Fillmore 161. It is worth noting that Roscoe Fillmore, an admirer of the Soviet Union who voted for Buck, was uncomfortable with direct Soviet meddling in the election.

¹⁵⁷ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 4 August 1927, vol. L, no. 31, p.1

by virtue of his politics and his work. One week in 1936, he asked newspaper readers how could anyone doubt that communism was the way of the future when the League of Nations reported Soviet industry growing 33% every year? Macdonald followed the rhetorical question with an admonition to “think about that, then think of building your lake or seaside cottage out of concrete blocks – anything but wood.”¹⁵⁸ A prediction of a world built of concrete joins hands with a prediction of a socialist future. Charlie’s switched abruptly from one subject to another, but the concrete talk is probably more than a non-sequitor. Concrete seemed like a new, a progressive, and even a revolutionary material early in the twentieth century when Macdonald first encountered it.

Macdonald was not alone in his fascination with concrete as the building material of the future, and many self-consciously modernist architects went out of their way to use it. Not that twentieth-century architects had invented concrete. Even ancient Roman builders used concrete in a limited way to add sculptural elements to buildings. Concrete always had been a marginal material, however, considered less appropriate than stone or wood. At the turn of the twentieth century, concrete attracted the attention of modernists who were uncomfortable with the cultural connotations of traditional architecture. As the art historian Ian Sutton explains, “one does not have to be a Marxist to see that the great castles . . . were all (whatever else) blatant expressions of authority and power and the desire to display that power.”¹⁵⁹ (Macdonald, of course, actually was a Marxist). As architects tried to create new styles and to reject old ones, they found they also had to seek out new materials and to reject old ones that had established cultural significance.

¹⁵⁸ Kentville Concrete Products. Advertisement. The Advertiser. 14 May, 1936, no. 18, vol. LXIX, p. 5. One should in all fairness point out that while Soviet heavy industry did indeed grow very quickly during this period, between the second and third Five-Year Plans, agriculture and light industry lagged behind. In other words, lots of guns, little butter.

¹⁵⁹ Ian Sutton, Western Architecture (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) 7.

“This is the age of concrete,” trumpeted Macdonald.¹⁶⁰ In selling concrete, Macdonald thought that he sold the future. Concrete and other new productions of “science” would let people live a better and more enlightened existence. Explained Macdonald, “Now that the villain John Barleycorn has been put down, and the God of War overthrown by speed wagons, why not place the wooden building program on the chute, with the hoop-skirt and bustle to go down with the doodle bug and dodo? BUILD WITH CONCRETE BLOCKS.”¹⁶¹ In such circumstances, not to build with concrete was to side with degenerate alcoholism, war, anachronistic Victorian fashions, and the evolutionarily unfit. The way to side against all of the detritus of the unenlightened past was to build a seaside cottage out of concrete, or so Macdonald believed.

Macdonald’s greatest architectural achievements huddle together along a rocky stretch of the Bay of Fundy shore at Huntington Point. The five concrete cottages, four of which survive today, looked as though they had popped out of a storybook. A visitor to Huntington Point in 1941, only a few years after their construction, described the cottages as the sort of houses “in which Snow White and her seven dwarfs might have lived.”¹⁶² The cottages still attract visitors today, despite their seclusion, and it is easy to see why. The cottages are boldly experimental. Their organic, rounded forms and bright colours look altogether different from the typical boxy wooden cottage. Most admirers do not know it, but Charles Macdonald and Kentville Concrete Products built the five cottages at Huntington Point.

The triumph of the cottages is that they look fanciful, but at the same time they seem to have been created with their environment in mind. As one drives down the road from Hall’s Harbour to Huntington Point, it seems as though a line of several ships is

¹⁶⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 15 August 1935, no. 33, vol. LXVIII, p. 5

¹⁶¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 27 September 1928, no. 39, vol. LI. In 1928, World War One still seemed to have been the war to end all wars, and Prohibition was in full swing in the United States. Perhaps it was not so strange to think of alcohol and war as on the wane.

¹⁶² F.M.R. 8

sailing past the cottages. In fact, these “ships” are concrete chimney caps that Macdonald placed on the cottages precisely so they might have such an effect.¹⁶³ In addition, Charlie incorporated huge concrete beach stones into the walls and chimneys of the cottages. Suiting the building to the setting was an ideal of Charlie’s (notwithstanding the Centreville house). “A cottage by the seaside, lake, or stream, must harmonize with its environment to look well – it must fit in,” aphorized Macdonald.¹⁶⁴

Charlie and Mabel began camping at Huntington Point in 1919, generally spending most of every summer there. The small coastal settlement, just to the northwest of the lobster-fishing village and current tourist hot spot of Hall’s Harbour, was inhabited only by two farming Pineo families in the early 1900s.¹⁶⁵ Huntington Point had many virtues for Charlie, close enough to Centreville that he could visit frequently, within sight of the sea, and very peaceful and unspoiled. Finally, said Mabel, “he got the idea that we would build a cottage and then we wouldn’t have to tent.”¹⁶⁶ Soon the enterprising Charlie had bought out one of the Pineo families, giving himself the freedom to build his cottage there.

Between 1934 and 1938, all five cottages sprang up. The Great Depression proved a very difficult time for Kentville Concrete Products, as for so many other businesses, because few people could afford their services. The company did not have nearly enough business to keep even its small workforce occupied. Luckily, Macdonald had set aside enough money for a “rainy day” that Kentville Concrete Products could weather the hard times without letting anyone go. The downturn in business and the surplus of labour may have been blessings in disguise, for they allowed Macdonald to build his cottage. And then another, and another, and another, and another. As Bob

¹⁶³ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Interview

¹⁶⁴ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 8 August, vol. LXVIII, no. 32, p.5

¹⁶⁵ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Interview

¹⁶⁶ Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview

Farris told journalist Patty Mintz in 1989, “when work got slack at the plant, we’d go work there [Huntington Point].”¹⁶⁷

The five cottages were the Teapot Cottage, the Jefferson Cottage, and the Green Cottage, all in a row right on the beach, and the Blue Cottage and the Macdonald Cottage, further up the road. The Macdonald cottage, the last completed, Mabel and Charlie took for themselves. The others were rented out for a time, and gradually sold to people whom Charlie trusted to care for them properly. The Teapot Cottage, also called the “Mushroom Cottage,” or the “Igloo,” was probably the best loved and certainly the simplest. It looked almost like a mushroom, with its cylindrical “stem” (walls) and domed “cap” (the roof).

Macdonald and his colleagues made no architectural plans, at least not on paper, and Laurette writes that the cottages were “improvised.”¹⁶⁸ In such circumstances, it is difficult to establish Macdonald’s authorship of the cottages. If other men worked on the cottages on an irregular basis, in an atmosphere of cooperation, perhaps collective authorship on behalf of the whole firm could be argued. Why give total credit for the project to one man? The weight of oral testimony argues for Macdonald’s prominence, however. Everyone speaks of them as Charlie’s cottages, in that the initiative, inspiration, and vision for the project all sprung from him, even if the work was done in an atmosphere of spontaneity.

Spontaneity and vision have particular resonance for the 1920s and 1930s in the context of expressionism. “Expressionism” is a slippery word to define. Ian Sutton puts it as well as any, and better than most, when he says that expressionism stood for “emotion rather than reason, revolt rather than conformity, assertive personality rather than functional anonymity. With Expressionist buildings, it seems, the imaginative impulse came first, fresh from the artist’s subconscious, and was then adapted for use in

¹⁶⁷ Mintz, “Huntington Point’s unique, old, ‘fairy tale cottages’”

¹⁶⁸ Laurette 12

the real world.”¹⁶⁹ Sutton’s description of expressionism seems to get at something important in the way Macdonald worked. Mabel said in 1981 that in none of his architectural adventures did her husband bother with blueprints, that “he never had a plan, he never had a drawing or anything he just went and made it up out of his own head.”¹⁷⁰

Expressionism was losing out to International Modernism by the mid-1930s. The International Style of modernism exalted abstract grids, monumental scale, urbanism, and total precision, eschewed adornment and decoration.¹⁷¹ Think of the glass, steel, and concrete towers that dominate the skyline of most cities and you have a good idea of the style, championed by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and others. One should not portray the International Style as the polar opposite from what a proto-expressionist like Macdonald built, but the differences are very great indeed. Charlie disliked urbanization, stating bluntly, “We do not want to see towns or cities grow larger.”¹⁷² Charile worked on a small scale, on little houses. Nothing could have been further from the tastes of an International Modernist. A man like Le Corbusier looked upon houses as relics, to be replaced by enormous housing towers as human history marched forward. Nothing of architectural interest could happen in the anachronistic “single-family villa.”¹⁷³

A few people dissented from hegemonic and rectilinear modernism. Take as an example Erich Mendelsohn, whose first exhibit, “Erich Mendelsohn, Architecture in Steel and Reinforced Concrete” opened in Berlin in 1919. As his exhibition’s title suggests, concrete was an important element of Mendelsohn’s vision as an architect. Mendelsohn considered concrete “the building material for a new formal expression, for the new style.”¹⁷⁴ Mendelsohn’s avowed purpose was to create “new forms and building

¹⁶⁹ Sutton 339

¹⁷⁰ Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview

¹⁷¹ Sutton 377

¹⁷² Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 17 January, 1946, vol. LXIX, no. 3, p. 5

¹⁷³ James 231

¹⁷⁴ James 21

materials [to] produce valid symbols for the postwar era.”¹⁷⁵ Students of architecture have compared Mendelsohn to Macdonald, and Macdonald’s aesthetic seems close akin to Mendelsohn’s “dynamic functionalism” that “integrate[d] stylistic experimentation, constructional innovation, and disparate influences from the surrounding culture.”¹⁷⁶ Macdonald’s Centreville house and Huntington Point cottages resemble nothing else in Nova Scotia, experiment with reinforced concrete construction, and integrate typically local features like the beach stones and the ships, concrete deer, and concrete gulls.

Mendelsohn’s 1921 Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Germany, is probably the architect’s best-known work. Quickly associated in the public mind with Einstein’s theory of relativity and with the still-unfamiliar material concrete, it became a famous, even an iconic, image of Europe’s new beginning after World War One. The building merited all the publicity that it garnered. Its plastic, fluid forms marked one of the first times that concrete had been used on its own terms, instead of being molded to create a building that looked like the sort of conventional, boxy construction that could have been made from wood or stone.¹⁷⁷ It is an intriguing but idle pastime to wonder whether Macdonald saw a photograph or drawing of the Einstein Tower.

The way in which Mendelsohn and Macdonald used concrete was very unlike the way that earlier builders had used it. The first concrete cottage built in 1846 in Newcastle, UK, had exactly the same shape as a wooden cottage. The artistic climate had changed by the 1920s. The artistic ideal of ‘truth in materials’ enjoyed great vogue after World War One.¹⁷⁸ “Truth in materials” tries to guide artists in their use of their materials, arguing that any material should express its essence in a work of art, and never be made to imitate some other material. ‘Truth in materials’ certainly illuminates Mendelsohn’s tower, and Macdonald’s Huntington Point Cottages. The curvy lines of

¹⁷⁵ James 12

¹⁷⁶ James 3

¹⁷⁷ Brown, lecture

¹⁷⁸ Brown, lecture

these buildings display all of the plasticity and sculptural potential of concrete, rather than imitating stone or wood. The traditional forms of a building, whether a cottage or a tower, belong to the materials used to make those buildings. To make a concrete house shaped like a wooden house with planar walls and a pitched roof would be a shame, in that making a concrete house in such a way completely ignores the properties of concrete itself.

Whether Macdonald actually heard aesthetic discussions about truth in materials is anybody's guess. Perhaps he knew a lot about Erich Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier. Macdonald was well read, well traveled, and cared deeply about art. When he writes that "concrete has a texture peculiar to itself. It is and should be rough – with a sand and gravel mixture. People of good judgment and taste recognize this and accentuate this feature of concrete, rather than hide it under a glaze or finish,"¹⁷⁹ he seems of a piece with the French modernist luminary Le Corbusier and his praise of "*le béton brut*." "People of good judgment and taste" may even allude to someone like Le Corbusier, although it could just be a rhetorical invention.

Sometimes Macdonald showed absolutely no regard whatever for modernism, as when he advertised, "We are making garden furniture of concrete, rusticated to the 'nth degree, painted to resemble wood. Quaint and old, cracks, wormholes and all, but it gets harder with age. Drop in"¹⁸⁰ Le Corbusier might have screamed. Of course, Macdonald had to sell what middle-class consumers wanted to buy. Perhaps Charlie just held his nose and pandered to tastes he did not share. Somehow, however, it seems unlikely that Macdonald would have regarded mock-wood furniture as a travesty. Macdonald would have admired the skilled workmanship and gloried in the further evidence of the versatility

¹⁷⁹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 11 October 1928, vol. LI, no. 41, p.1

¹⁸⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 26 July, 1928, vol. LI, no. 30, p.1

of concrete, which could do anything that wood could do, but do it better. Le Corbusier and Mendelsohn were architects, not artisans, while Macdonald was both at once.

Speculating about what Macdonald may or may not have read or seen or heard is just a parlour game, however. None of this talk about international art and architecture is presented in order to claim that Macdonald avidly followed developments in modern art and that his reactions to those developments spurred him to develop his style. What comparing Macdonald to Mendelsohn is meant to do is to show Macdonald as a man of his time. Macdonald seems to have been very much an isolated figure as an artist. As Mabel said in 1981, “there didn’t seem to be much interest in art” around the Annapolis Valley during Charlie’s lifetime.¹⁸¹

Macdonald’s buildings and sculptures especially have been interpreted as manifestations of his own eccentricity. Visitors to the Charles Macdonald House usually describe the building as “unique.”¹⁸² In the context of rural Nova Scotia, Macdonald’s buildings do seem unique in that they are singular and without companions. Wayne Brown, however, has pointed the way to another interpretation of Macdonald as an artist, a theme developed in his 2001 lecture, “Charles Macdonald’s Modernism.” Macdonald, suggests Brown, worked on architectural problems similar to those of his contemporaries. We call them modernists, and perhaps we ought to re-consider Macdonald in light of their achievements and their aesthetic.¹⁸³

Mendelsohn, of course, could not build his tower entirely of concrete as he had wished, but had to resort to brick parged with concrete. Mendelsohn had drawn plans for many more buildings than he had built in 1919, and had only limited practical experience with concrete. Conventional wisdom has it that Mendelsohn could not make his favoured material do what he wanted it to do.¹⁸⁴ Kathleen James believes that the tower could

¹⁸¹ Senn 50

¹⁸² Joan Kennedy, for example, twice calls Mabel’s house “unique” when she interviewed her (Mabel Meisner Macdonald, Interview with Joan Kennedy).

¹⁸³ Brown, lecture

¹⁸⁴ Brown, lecture

have been built with concrete as planned, however, and only post-war shortages forced Mendelsohn to compromise.¹⁸⁵ Macdonald, of course, was lucky enough to be his own supplier of concrete, but it does highlight his skill as a builder to know that he was mastering technical problems that bedeviled one of the world's greatest and best-trained architects.

The formal and technical experiments that engaged Mendelsohn ultimately served a social vision. Mendelsohn wanted to build "a new world," not just architecture.¹⁸⁶ Macdonald also seems to have had a social vision for Huntington Point. F.M.R. writes that Macdonald told her that when he and Mabel first came to Huntington Point, "we felt others might enjoy it too and forget their worries and cares for a time; so we put up other cottages, one by one. Now all through the summer, and even in the spring or fall, they're seldom empty. People find all they need within; just simple things. But if they come once, they come again."¹⁸⁷ Charlie liked Huntington Point because it let people get away from their toilsome lives in a capitalist state and into a more natural place where consumerism and social inequality would not intrude.

Charlie wanted other people to share the Point with him, publishing invitations in

The Advertiser:

It's quiet, but the birds sing, rabbits roost on the window sills – sometimes – deer wanders by – and waves murmur endlessly where we have cabins on the bay shore. They are not very large, but they're lightning proof, fireproof; they're rough, but there's good water handy, fireplace wood on the beach; flush toilets, septic tanks. People 'say' they like em. Phone 688.¹⁸⁸

Kaye Hazelwood remembers that for an absolute pittance, ten cents or so, people could stay in the cottages.¹⁸⁹ Never did Charlie profit from the development, and never did he try. In fact, he explicitly forbade anyone from opening a store at the Point. A man with a

¹⁸⁵ James 260, n. 94

¹⁸⁶ James 20

¹⁸⁷ F.M.R. 8

¹⁸⁸ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 10 June 1941, no. 28, vol. LXIV, p. 5

¹⁸⁹ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Interview

true social conscience, Macdonald seems to have wanted to do something nice for his fellow human beings. He did.

The Macdonalds summered in Huntington Point and Charlie regarded it as a refuge from the toils of the workaday world. As summer approached Macdonald looked forward to leaving the Valley for the coast and once he confessed to his readers, “we had sump’n to say about somep’n, but it’s gone. Too hot – all we can think about is cool sea breezes under the greenwood tree, camping out.”¹⁹⁰ In fact Macdonald often ran the same ad for weeks on end during the summer months, suggesting that day-dreamed camping trips did in fact go ahead. For all that Charlie always seems to have been busy, he prized leisure and regretted that his work at the concrete plant kept him from more pleasant outdoor pursuits. In 1927 Charlie declared, “Not for us Nova Scotia’s wonderland in Spring-time . . . It’s Forbidden! It’s for Wealth. We must make **KENTVILLE CONCRETE PRODUCTS.**”¹⁹¹ Recall that Macdonald dreamed of a economic nostrum that would fill all human needs on a one-hour workday.

Eventually Macdonald would escape from the toils of concrete manufacturing, just as he had wished to do in 1927. Charlie retired in 1951 from regular duties at Kentville Concrete Products. After putting in a day’s work at the plant on Brooklyn Road, Macdonald handed the keys to the foreman, proclaiming, “It’s yours!”¹⁹² The story raises a few questions about the way Kentville Concrete Products operated. If the company truly had been a cooperative, why would Macdonald have to tell the workers that it was theirs? Perhaps it ran as a cooperative, but Charlie had formal legal ownership for ease of administration. Perhaps Charlie, as the company’s founder and as a very

¹⁹⁰ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 12 June 1930, no. 23, vol. LIII, p. 5

¹⁹¹ Kentville Concrete Products, Advertisement, The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 31 March 1927, no. 13, vol. L, p. 1

¹⁹² Garnet Misner, the geneologist of Mabel’s family, told this story, preserved in the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society’s collection of anecdotes.

forceful personality, had dominated the cooperative to such an extent that the other workers did not *feel* like it was their own until after he had retired.

Macdonald lived his last years quietly. In retirement Charlie had more time for painting, using an easel made from two pieces of driftwood he had banged together. When Macdonald was 88 years old, Frank Fillmore testified that “his painting hand is still as steady as a rock. Mabel says his work is better than ever.”¹⁹³ Mabel and Frank Fillmore, who as Roscoe Fillmore’s youngest son had known Charlie since he was a small child, are a bit partial as critics of his work. Charlie’s later work has a rough and simplified appearance which can lend the paintings a certain power that comes with austerity, but which has also provoked suggestions that the painter was losing his eyesight.¹⁹⁴

A sketchbook dating from the late 1950s, now reposing in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, affords a glimpse into the way Charlie worked in old age. The 9X12-inch wire-bound booklet contains work very different from the earlier sketchbooks he kept as a young man. As in the earliest books, Macdonald had made sketches of rural scenes. The 1950s sketches have far less finish than earlier ones, however, and Macdonald seems to have meant them to serve as the raw material for oil paintings even as he made them. Macdonald usually divided a sketch into several areas, labelling each one with suggestions for colours, like “fade-purple-purple.” Several of the sketches in the spiral booklet, like “Neil’s Harbour,” “Lakes o’ Law,” and “Mabou Harbour,” would become oils in the course of time.

If the elderly Macdonald kept up his habit of sketching, he had long since given up his habit of running strident commentary in *The Advertiser*. Several journalists from the paper did interview him when he was in his eighties and nineties, however. In part, they were attracted by his unusual home and eccentric reputation. In part, Charlie had become

¹⁹³ Frank Fillmore, Fillmore Photos and Cutlines

¹⁹⁴ Parent 2

almost a living fossil of the golden age of sail, probably one of the last living men to have sailed cargoes around the world on a 1000-ton barque. Throughout his life Charlie had enjoyed good health and Eileen Macdonald does not remember him ever having been sick before his last illness.¹⁹⁵ Interviews show Charlie to have been alert and genial to the end. Asked by a newspaper reporter if he would make it to the century mark, Charlie allowed that “I’m going to give it a try.”¹⁹⁶

Notwithstanding Macdonald’s comfortable, quiet life, his old restlessness remained. Mabel disapproved of her husband wandering around on his own because he had become rather unsteady on his feet in his eighties. For the same reason, she disapproved of him drinking, which he did on occasion, because it made him even more unsteady. Charlie knew Mabel’s worries, and knew they were for his own good, but he could not help himself. Neighbours from Huntington Point say that he would sneak over to their cottages and sit for hours telling them stories, glass in hand. If asked whether Mabel knew where he was, he would reply, “ah, she won’t miss me!” Charlie knew he lied, because when it came time to leave, he would enjoin the neighbour to “not tell the lady” of his visit.¹⁹⁷

The Macdonalds were married for over fifty years. The couple had no children, perhaps making a prophet of Charlie, who had said of child-rearing in 1902 that while he enjoyed giving advice to others, “When you come to practical experience, I’d rather be excused.”¹⁹⁸ There are many stories, however, that attest to their fondness for children. Donald Reece, who knew the Macdonalds as a little boy, remembers that Charlie used to carry a large roll of licorice in his pocket. The old man would slice off pieces of licorice for children, “quite a thing in those days.”¹⁹⁹ Another recipient of displaced parental

¹⁹⁵ Eileen Macdonald, Interview.

¹⁹⁶ D.I. Scotney, “Still Active at 91.” *The Advertiser*. Undated clipping from the archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society.

¹⁹⁷ Collection of anecdotes from Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society Archives.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Macdonald, Letter to Violet Macdonald: 18 March 1902.

¹⁹⁹ Collection of anecdotes, Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society Archives

affection may have been their spoiled pet beagle Twinkle (with his very own concrete dog-house), whom the Macdonalds worried over as though he were a child.²⁰⁰

Charles Macdonald died on May 28, 1967, at the advanced age of 93, in the Kentville hospital after “a brief illness.”²⁰¹ Pastor F.C. Fenerty of the Bethany Memorial Baptist Church officiated the unrepentant atheist’s funeral in a Kentville chapel. Macdonald is buried in Steam Mill. Mabel survived him for almost fifteen years, continuing to live in Centreville in winter and Huntington Point in the summer. Mabel and Charlie had always been generous to a fault, and Charlie had not kept any controlling stake in Kentville Concrete Products after he retired. The Macdonalds’ only income had been Charlie’s small pension from Kentville Concrete.²⁰² Charlie’s will left his assets to the community of Centreville, with Mabel to retain them until she died. Leaving his property to the community was a magnanimous gesture on Charlie’s part. The money benefitted the Centreville Community Hall and his land became Centreville Park. Still, the estate was not large. Mabel was not destitute, but money was tight, and she had to sell many of Charlie’s paintings for income.²⁰³

Like her husband, Mabel remained quite healthy into old age and made a last camping trip to the Cabot Trail with some younger friends. Also like Charlie, Mabel valued her independence. Harley Hazelwood tells a story of Mabel repairing a the roof of her cottage in the late 1970s, using “this old rickety ladder that Charlie made out of poles.” She fell from the ladder, spraining her ankle, but climbed back up to finish the job. By the time Mabel was done, her whole leg was “just black.”²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, she did

²⁰⁰ Rosa (Fillmore) Skinner, Interview, Archives of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society, 29 July 1997.

²⁰¹ “Funeral For C.W. Macdonald Wed,” The Advertiser, Kentville, NS: 1 June 1967, no. 22, p.1

²⁰² Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, “Charles Macdonald”

²⁰³ See “In the Estate of Charles W. Macdonald, Deceased, Executor’s Accounts,” In the Court of Probate, Province of Nova Scotia, County of Kings, 1983. The records show that Mabel had only \$959.79 in the bank when she died, and so she might have had nothing at all if she had not sold \$2 000.00 worth of paintings.

²⁰⁴ Harley and Kaye Hazelwood, Personal Interview.

not ask her neighbours for help (which they gladly would have given) and drove herself to the hospital.

In 1980 the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia held a retrospective exhibition on Charles Macdonald, showing paintings donated by Mabel. The gallery staff considered Macdonald's works somewhat amateurish, but gallery curator Bernard Riordan mused that "to study the life of Charles Macdonald is to learn and gain an appreciation for a man who was filled with boundless energy and ambition and who lived life to the fullest."²⁰⁵ Macdonald managed to realize many of his dreams despite the formidable obstacles placed in his way. Canada did not bend to Macdonald's will, but he did not bend to the weight of conventional opinion either.

Never could Macdonald attend an art school as he hoped and never did his art find a wide public. Macdonald persevered to create a distinctive body of work. Never could Macdonald persuade his fellow Canadians of the wisdom of socialism, never did the state really recognize the legitimacy of socialism. Macdonald persevered to put his socialism into practice in a successful business and to speak out when he wanted. Macdonald lived at a time when a mass culture of consumerism and heedless overconsumption gained more and more sway in North America with every passing year, deaf to Macdonald's protests. Macdonald persevered to create in Centreville and at Huntington Point two refuges from unbridled capitalism. Whether or not one agrees with Macdonald's goals oneself, his determination and verve in pursuing them are impressive in themselves.

Mabel died the year after the art gallery exhibition, on October 11, 1981. Her cottage at Huntington Point went to Charlie's nephew Ted Macdonald and his wife Frances. Frances Macdonald and her family still live there in the summer. The Teapot Cottage was bulldozed into the sea by its owners in 1982, a move that continues to arouse controversy in Huntington Point. Apparently the cottage had begun to leak quite badly, its thin concrete roof succumbing to the rough weather of the Bay of Fundy. Only

²⁰⁵ Laurette 1

the tip of the cottage's chimney remains today, salvaged from the wreckage by Raymond Jefferson, who uses it as a planter. The Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society (see below) purchased the Blue Cottage for \$37 500 in August of 1997.²⁰⁶ The Society rents it out for twenty dollars per night, following the practice of Charlie who rented it out at twenty cents per night. The Green Cottage and the Jefferson Cottage remain well cared for in private hands.

As for the Centreville house, it passed into the hands of John and Charlotte Legge after Mabel's death. The Legges looked after the house, a big job given that concrete crumbles if not kept painted at all times. When the job finally became too big, they put the house up for sale. Few buyers came forward. One of those who did wanted to remove all of Charlie's sculptures of concrete animals from the lawn and turn the whole property into a service station. Luckily, friends of the house raised money and formed the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society to buy the house. Seven people, some of whom had not known each other before, raised \$10 000 in two weeks to make a down payment on the house. A museum has operated there since 1996, and the province of Nova Scotia has officially designated the house a Heritage Property. Inside the museum hang many of Macdonald's paintings and his concrete sculptures grace the lawn. Open from June 1 to Labour Day every summer, 11:30 to 4:30 every day. The admission fee is a free-will donation, so the price is right. See you there.

²⁰⁶ Robbins Elliott, "Interim financial report," Concrete Thoughts: The Occasional Newsletter of the Charles Macdonald House of Centreville Society, October 1997, p. 3