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# Life of a Centreville Socialist

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

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“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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> Sketching became a life-long passion of Macdonald’s, and many of his studies of trees, people, and farm animals still survive. Apparently,

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

