

Destination: the Arctic



Donald MacMillan at the rail of the schooner *Bowdoin*.

Donald MacMillan tore open the envelope. The telegram read: *If you are still interested in Arctic exploration, come to see me at once. Peary.*

The young high-school teacher jumped on the next train to New York. There he signed up to be an assistant on Robert Peary's 1908–1909 North Pole expedition.

MacMillan (Mac) had always dreamed of exploring the Arctic. He was born in 1874 in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the son of a sea captain. His father told fascinating stories about icebergs in the northern seas. As a young boy, Mac read all the books he could find about Arctic explorers. In 1898, he graduated from Bowdoin College, in Maine, and began teaching school, but he couldn't forget his dream.

On the 1908–1909 trip, Peary, his assistant Matthew Henson, and four North Greenland Inuit became the first people to reach the North Pole. MacMillan, struggling with painful frozen feet, reluctantly had to turn back early. But the Arctic fascinated him—and he was determined to return!

When the expedition arrived home, a man named Jerry Look asked MacMillan to talk to a group of townspeople near New York City. While there, Mac met Look's daughter Miriam. He told her lively stories about the dogs that pulled his sled, about polar bears and walruses, and about Inuit families.

Heading Back to the North

Mac did venture north again—many times. In 1913, he led a crew of seven men on a scientific mission. A ship left them in Etah, North Greenland, planning to return in two years. But Melville Bay was so packed with ice that it was four years before a ship could rescue them! Mac's crew could not

By Mary Morton Cowan

For almost fifty years, Donald MacMillan lived his dream of exploring the Far North. His wife, Miriam, joined him in that dream.

talk with their families back home because they couldn't get their two-way radio to work. When all the food they'd brought with them was gone, they hunted and explored with the Inuit. When Mac finally got home, Jerry Look helped raise money to build Mac his own ship for Arctic exploration. The two-masted wooden schooner was 88 feet long—one of the smallest yet toughest Arctic vessels ever built. Mac named her *Bowdoin* in honor



Mac and Miriam at the wheel of the *Bowdoin* in the 1940s.

of his college. In 1921, when the *Bowdoin* was launched, Look and his daughter Miriam were there.

Over the next thirty-three years MacMillan led many expeditions. Hundreds of crew members—high-school and college students, scientists, and doctors—sailed and explored with him. Most expeditions were summer trips, but three times the *Bowdoin* stayed north over the winter.

Mac's 1925 expedition pioneered the use of radio and aircraft in the Arctic. Mac worked with a U.S. Navy pilot, Richard Byrd. That trip made it possible for Byrd to be the first person to fly over the North Pole the following year.

Miriam, His Arctic Partner

In 1935 Mac and Miriam were married. Miriam thought Mac would stop exploring, but he told her, "I have more work to do up there." So she insisted on going with him. In 1938 Miriam became the *Bowdoin's* first female crew member. She stood watch, took her turn at the wheel, and swabbed decks with the other crew members. Miriam sailed on Mac's eight remaining expeditions, navigating through uncharted waters and around icebergs.

Year after year Mac returned to the United States with more scientific knowledge of the Arctic and an increased understanding of the Inuit. He discovered nine islands and more than forty glaciers. He sent the first

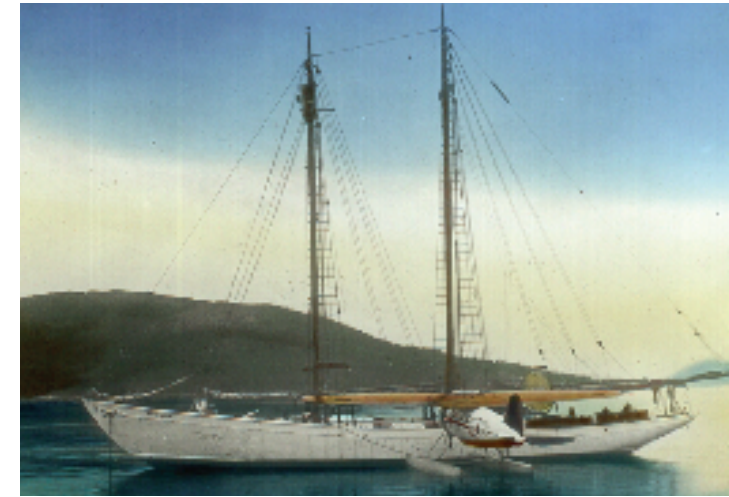
shortwave-radio messages from the Arctic. He took thousands of pictures, including the first movies ever taken of musk oxen. He was almost trampled taking *that* film footage! Mac became known as one of the world's best navigators of the eastern Canadian and Greenland Arctic. During World War II, the U.S. Navy enlisted his help to make maps and choose sites for military bases.

The MacMillans' Legacy

Mac's and Miriam's photographs have been published in numerous books and magazines. They each wrote books and articles about the heritage of the Inuit, describing families as they lived before modern civilization changed their way of life. Miriam recorded conversations and songs on tape. Mac learned the Inuit language so well that he wrote a 3,000-word dictionary. He also started a school for Inuit children in Nain, Labrador, and supported it for forty years.

In 1967, Bowdoin College opened the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum. Miriam had been organizing Mac's collections for years. She continued to catalog

MacMillan used this picture of a polar bear on drift ice when talking about his Arctic adventures.



The *Bowdoin* and an airplane in Labrador.

his photos for the museum after his death in 1970. And until her death 17 years later, she supported the Inuit school and raised money to restore the *Bowdoin*, now a training ship at Maine Maritime Academy.

For almost fifty years, Donald MacMillan lived his dream of exploring the Far North—from his first trip with Peary in 1908 until his last expedition in 1954. Miriam joined that dream for the last third of his career. Together they gathered extensive knowledge of the Arctic and its people, and shared that knowledge with all of us.



Read about an Antarctic trip on HighlightsKids.com.