

D. B. MacMillan

(1874-1970)

D. B. MacMillan, "Captain Mac", is no longer with us. As an Arctic sailor and old-time sled driver he ranked with the greats of northern skippers, Bob Bartlett, Henry Larsen and Otto Sverdrup, and outlasted them all. An iron body, conditioned by early gymnastic effort and sustained until the age of fourscore by conning his ship through the ice, kept him hale and mentally active until the end of 95 years.

His Cape Breton born father was lost at sea when he was nine, his widowed mother died a few years later. So he moved from his birthplace, Provincetown, Mass. (to which he eventually retired, its most revered citizen) to Maine, with which State, and with Bowdoin College in particular, he had intimate life-long connections. He was teaching school, inspiring his pupils in the Maine woods with a love of botany and geology, when Peary asked him to join his assault on the Pole in 1908. But his heart was always with the sea, and now he was going as far north as any ship under power had gone. He learned his business fast, and was in charge of one of the support parties on Peary's poleward march. He suffered frozen feet on this trip, but this did not prevent him from later making a powerful journey along the north Greenland coast.

From now on the Arctic was his life. He started planning a new expedition with his *Roosevelt* cabin mate Borup in 1911, but Borup died, and it was 1913 before he got away on the "Crockerland Expedition". His "Four Years in the Frozen North" tells the tale of this project, when important new discoveries were made on Ellesmere Island and on the ice to its northwest where "Crockerland" was shown to be imaginary — an ice island perhaps?

In 1920 MacMillan commissioned the famous vessel *Bowdoin* named after his Maine college, a 60-ton auxiliary wooden schooner designed to buck ice in arctic waters. First he took a scientific party to southwest Baffin Island, then to Northwest Greenland, wintering on both occasions. In 1925, however, it was a bigger show, sponsored by the National Geographic Society and with a U.S. Navy aviation unit consisting of three aircraft commanded by Richard E. Byrd. Only 50 hours were flown however, mostly over Canadian territory, which resulted in some controversy especially when Captain Bernier and the Canadian Arctic Patrol arrived at Etah.

Don MacMillan was never very respectful, shall we say, to Canadian game laws or territorial claims, but his attitude mellowed over the years and he was agreeable to accept Canadian representatives on his *Bowdoin* voyages. These became almost annual affairs, on which he took scientists and college boys to Labrador, Baffin and Greenland.

And after 1935, the year he married, Miriam MacMillan went with him delighting, as much as he did, at pitting her skill against the ice. The war years saw *Bowdoin* taken over by the U.S. Navy. At first MacMillan was her skipper, but later he was moved to a consultative desk job with the Hydrographer while others, less competent, did their best to ruin his stout schooner. But he was able to reclaim her and refit her after the war, and at the age of eighty was still sailing north.

I last saw MacMillan at a military conference in Boston in 1960 when his sound advice was still being sought and Miriam told stories of their northern life. His country had honoured him by the rank of Rear Admiral, but the world, and especially those who sailed with him, will remember him as "Captain Mac" of the *Bowdoin*.

P. D. Baird

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