

Alexander M'Donald L.R.C.S.E (1817 – c. 1848)

Alexander M'Donald (or McDonald) was the assistant surgeon on the ship HMS *Terror*, which accompanied HMS *Erebus* in the Sir John Franklin expedition to the Northwest Passage, 1845–48. Alexander was born in September 1817 in Laurencekirk, a village some 50 km south of Aberdeen in NE Scotland. His father was Robert M'Donald (1791–1859), a manufacturer of decorative snuffboxes; his mother was Elizabeth Stiven (1793–1867).

With several family-related, box-making businesses already established, Alexander chose a career in medicine and graduated in 1838, at the age of 21, as a licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh (LRCSE). In his final year he was awarded the John Argyll Robertson class medal. He was also a member of the Cuvierian Natural History Society of Edinburgh.

After graduating, Alexander was employed between 1839 and 1841 by the Scottish whaling industry, which was part of a normal progression at the time for newly qualified surgeons to gain a licence to practice. It was there he consolidated his relationship with a university patron, whaling captain William Penny (Ross, 1983), and his vessel the *Bon Accord*. Through his whaling trips, M'Donald encountered Eenoooloapik, a young Inuk from Baffin Island, who was brought to Aberdeen by Penny on the whaling vessel *Nep-tune* in 1839. Eenoooloapik's local knowledge ultimately led to the rediscovery of Cumberland Sound, an area where whales were particularly abundant. The area was subsequently exploited by Captain Penny (Jones, 2004). The same William Penny was later to lead two expeditions to search for the missing Franklin crews, including his old friend and colleague M'Donald: first on the whaler *Advice* with Robert Goodsir in 1849, and later the expedition with the ships HMS *Lady Franklin* and HMS *Sophia* in 1850. Penny is one of those credited with the discovery on Beechey Island of Franklin's winter quarters and the three bodies interred there (Ross, 1983).

Eenoooloapik, or 'Eenoo,' having contracted a respiratory infection, spent only a single winter in Aberdeen under the care of M'Donald, who was also both his tutor and biographer (Rowley, 1986; Jones, 2004). Eenoo departed for his homeland in April 1840, transported on the *Bon Accord* with Penny as captain and M'Donald as the scientist/surgeon. In his 1841 book, *A narrative of some passages in the history of Eenoooloapik...*, M'Donald draws upon the experiences shared with Eenoo in exploring the natural and cultural history of the indigenous peoples living in eastern Baffin Island. This book, which includes extensive passages on Inuit customs and belief systems, is reported to be the only such full-length, contemporary biography of the Inuk from the 19th century. M'Donald meanwhile gained a commission from the navy and was assigned to serve as surgeon to the HMS *Belvidere* in the Mediterranean from autumn 1841 to spring 1845.



Alexander M'Donald. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

M'Donald's 1841 publication came to the attention of Sir John Franklin, who was then planning a further expedition to explore and map the Northwest Passage (Fraser, 1880). M'Donald duly joined the expedition as assistant surgeon to John Smart Peddie on HMS *Terror*, captained by Francis Crozier. The ships set sail from the Thames on 19 May 1845 on the way to re-provision at Aberdeen.

The passage of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* up through the Davis Strait and Lancaster Sound is well documented (e.g., Cyriax, 1939; Beardsley, 2002). At this time, confidence of some crew members was still high. In what was probably his final letter, dated 11 July 1845 and dispatched from the Whalefish Islands, M'Donald (1845) wrote that "some among us are so sanguine as to believe that we will reach the Pacific without wintering." The last reported sighting of the *Erebus* and *Terror* was from the whaler *Prince of Wales* on 26 July.

By the autumn of 1845, the ships were anchored for the winter off Beechey Island. After this time, as revealed by the document left by Capts. Crozier and Fitzjames and discovered by Hobson at Point Victory, the ships became locked in ice in Victoria Strait, off the northwest coast of King William Island, in September 1846.

As both ships were provisioned for only three years, after a second winter, the ships were abandoned in April 1848, and the remaining 105 crew members initially headed south along the western shore of King William Island. From the skeletal remains of the crew and other artefacts (McClin-tock, 1881; Keenleyside et al., 1997), it has been established that the then surviving crew died between Cape Felix, along the western shore of King William Island, and Starvation Cove on the Adelaide Peninsula. The greatest profusion of skeletal remains was found in the Erebus Bay area.



EENOOLLOAPIK.

A N A R R A T I V E
 OF SOME PASSAGES IN THE HISTORY OF
 E E N O O L L O O A P I K,
 A Y O U N G E S Q U I M A U X,
 WHO WAS BROUGHT TO BRITAIN IN 1839, IN THE SHIP "NEPTUNE"
 OF ABERDEEN.
 AN ACCOUNT OF THE
 DISCOVERY OF HOGARTH'S SOUND:
 REMARKS ON THE NORTHERN WHALE FISHERY,
 AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ITS IMPROVEMENT, &c. &c.
 BY ALEXANDER M'DONALD, L.R.C.S.E.
Member of the Victoria Island History Society of Edinburgh.

EDINBURGH: FRASER & CO.
 AND J. HOGG, 116 NICOLSON STREET.
 1841.

Frontispiece to M'Donald's (1841) biography of Eenoooloopik.

A total of six items attributed to Alexander M'Donald, including his medal, were reported by McClintock (1881) and are listed by the National Maritime Museum (www.nmm.ac.uk). All but one item was recovered by bartering with the local Inuit population in the general location of King William Island. That one item, a silver teaspoon, was recovered in situ among the many relics found, along with two corpses, in an abandoned boat near Erebus Bay. The disposition of the artefacts in the area of King William Island supports the theory that Alexander perished (aged c. 31), along with his comrades, most probably on the western shore of King William Island in the vicinity of Erebus Bay.

Captain McClintock returned to London on 23 September 1859, ten weeks after the death of Alexander's father, Robert M'Donald.

Alexander M'Donald is commemorated on the family gravestone in Laurencekirk along with his father, mother, and sisters. The inscription is now incomplete, but the original is reported to have read: "Alexander: Assistant Surgeon with the Expedition of Sir John Franklin in 1845."

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