William Alister Macdonald (1861–1956) of Scotland and Tahiti

A portrait of the artist in the third age

Iain Macdonald

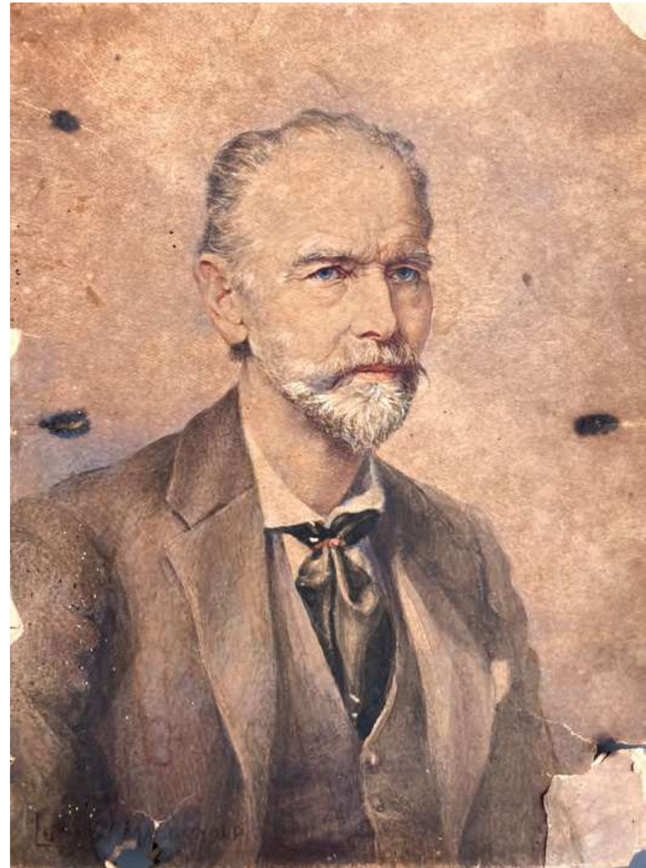
William Alister Macdonald (1861–1956) (Pl 1) had a knack for being at the right place at the right time to record London and Tahiti before they were transformed by the advances in 20th-century travel. London was captured in the early 1900s before the automobile and war transformed the City, and Tahiti in the 1920s before tourism and commercial exposure to the wider world. Before the Great War of 1914–18 Macdonald had travelled widely across Britain and Europe to paint, preferring to travel alone. He had a complicated and unconventional family life, far removed from the strict religious and moral code of the Free Church of Scotland in which he grew up.

The only authorised biography of his early life was published in 1937 with Beresford Chancellor's *London Recalled*. Other retrospective summaries were published in Polynesia around the time of his death in 1956 and then more recently in an exhibition 'Après Gauguin' in the Musée de Tahiti in 2013. This paper aims to provide the most complete review and account of all the chapters in his long life, and also a focus on his relationship with the many writers he became friends with in Tahiti. Among these were some of the most celebrated and successful American writers of the first half of the 20th century, and the impact Macdonald had on their lives comes through indirect mentions in their texts and the paintings they commissioned to illustrate their books.

Macdonald was an explorer of sorts, and the titles of his paintings in catalogues held at the National Art Library in the V&A reveal the extent and frequency of his travels. In 1910, the year his son Ian was born, he painted in Lincolnshire, Kent, Ludlow, Fife, Barra, Naples, Assisi, Perugia, Geneva and Corfu. But we must refrain from applying the norms of the modern age to Edwardian England, for at the same time another gentleman traveller, the arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922), was similarly restless and driven by their work. 'On shore, Shackleton showed little interest in his family, putting all his mind on expeditions, but once away from them, he missed them dearly. Either way, he was never fully content, always chasing something just beyond his reach.'[1] In Macdonald's long life he travelled for as long as his health allowed, into his nineties, watching the world go by from the comfort of a steamer chair.

This story starts with a book that accelerated a growing interest and romance of the Pacific South Seas among English-reading audiences after the Great War of 1914–18. Macdonald was a well-read man who moved in London society and Somerset Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) cannot have escaped his attention and been the subject of conversation.

> The artist, painter, poet, or musician, by his decoration, sublime or beautiful, satisfies the aesthetic sense; but that is akin to the sexual instinct, and shares its barbarity: he lays before you also the greater gift of himself. To pursue his secret has something of the fascination of a detective story. It is a riddle which shares with the universe the merit of having no answer.[2]



The illustrations are of works by W Alister Macdonald (1861–1956) unless otherwise stated

1 *W Alister Macdonald* possibly by Lucy Macdonald (1872–1951), 1936. Gouache on card, 15 x 11 cm. Private collection

The allure of the South Seas

Over a century ago, after the devastation and industrial-scale slaughter of the Great War and then the Spanish Flu that followed, there were many in Europe that sought an escape to a far-off paradise. For those that could afford it, and for the large audience of armchair travellers stuck at home who could not, there were many artists and writers who travelled south like migrating seabirds. The American author Zane Grey acknowledged the power of the writings by earlier travellers on his character Donald:

> As long as he could remember, Donald had cherished an unspoken desire to visit the South Seas. In his boyhood he had read Defoe and Stevenson, Melville's Typee and the works of Loti, Calderon, Brooks, and Nordoff and Hall.[3]

2 *Monks Wood*, 1919. Watercolour on paper. Private collection

2a Detail of initials of Dorothy Myhill and W Alister Macdonald in the watercolour illustrated in Pl 2

Nordhoff and Hall, surviving fighter pilots from the poppy fields of France, came to seek a new life but were conscious of the overblown romance of the South Seas that was taking hold in the minds of many in the creative salons and cafes of Europe.

> It became irresistible the more we talked of it, longing as we were for the solitude of the islands. The objection to this choice was that the groups of islands which we meant to visit have been endowed with an atmosphere of pseudoromance displeasing to the fastidious mind.[4]

The French painter Paul Gauguin, who abandoned a wife and family in Paris for Tahiti in 1891, had set the mark at the turn of the century: ' "All the joys – animal and human – of a free life are mine. I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary. I am entering into the truth, into nature." The manifesto for idealistic island hedonists ever since.'[5] Barkham argues that the idea of an island as a pristine paradise was not always the case and, as in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), they were seen as wild places to be tamed, or prisons for castaways and condemned men. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755) popularised the concept that islands are the ideal place for finding one's true self.

> … an urge to escape to small islands pulses through recent history, usually during times of crisis. When the mainland or mainstream is in crisis, people look to the periphery for escape or inspiration. Many of us are looking there right now. Are small-island values – robust self-sufficiency, for instance, or an integrated, neighbourly community – passé, or are they more pertinent than ever? Small islands may offer a critique of our larger island life, but they might also provide salvation for our epoch?[6]

There are certainly parallels in today's uncertain world, and with instant digital communication the world is harder to escape, yet the islands easier to reach. While many were motivated to venture south in search of escape and new start, the simple aesthetic attraction cannot be underestimated. Today the South Seas still maintain a timeless natural beauty that attracts artists.

> Heavy clouds hung over Tahiti and Moorea, clinging about the shoulders of the mountains whose peaks, rising above them, were still faintly visible against the somber glory of the sky. They seemed islands of sheer fancy, looked at from the sea.[7]

Somerset Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) was inspired by Gauguin's life, but it wasn't until the writer visited Tahiti in 1914 and experienced it for himself that he was able to create a novel that authentically described the island, and speak with such compelling conviction for the artist through his character Dick Stroeve.

> Why should you think that beauty, which is the most precious thing in the world, lies like a stone on the beach for the careless passer-by to pick up idly? Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognize it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination.[8]

The timing of the publication of Maugham's novel and its subject came at a time when Macdonald was living his own melodrama in London and Norfolk. In London he and his wife, Lucy (1872–1951), herself a well-known miniaturist painter and Honorary Secretary of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, had a son, Ian (1910–1935) and ran the Little Gallery in Victoria Street, Westminster. He frequently travelled alone to paint, enjoying the freedom of Europe before the War, but was restricted to England and Wales during and immediately after it. Norfolk was a place of significance, because it was where Macdonald launched his artistic career with a group of fellow artists in 1884. Two years later, on a fishing vessel to the North Sea fishing grounds on Dogger Bank, he sold a watercolour and an account of line fishing to *The Illustrated London News* for 11 guineas (10 for the drawings and one for the writing). In 1919, the year *The Moon and Sixpence* was published, he presented a watercolour of Monks Wood to a young governess, Dorothy Myhill (1890–1981), who lived in the village of Foundenhall in

3 *A Game of Chess, SS Arawa*, 1921. Pencil on paper, 10.5 x 18.5 cm. Collection of the author

4 *Came from Orkney, SS Arawa*, 1921. Pencil on paper, 18.5 x 10.5 cm. Collection of the author

5 *Chic!, SS Arawa*, 1921. Pencil on paper, 18.5 x 10.5 cm. Collection of the author

Norfolk, and on the trunk of a tree he inscribed their initials (Pl 2 Pl 2a). This relationship was actively discouraged by Dorothy's father, William Myhill (1839–1925), a widower since 1908 ,who relied upon the care of his six daughters. He insisted that Dorothy's relationship with Macdonald was broken off and forbade Macdonald to enter the house. The reason was the age difference of twenty-nine years: 'Mac' was old enough to be Dorothy's father. Perhaps inspired by Maugham's novel, however, they escaped the gossip and scandal of London society and Macdonald and Dorothy boarded the *SS Arawa* bound for New Zealand on 5 May 1921. He was sixty, twenty years older than Maugham's protagonist, Strickland. Maugham understood the sense of shock that he would leave behind in Edwardian England where 'much was made of being seen to be fair and gentlemanly'.[9]

> 'Isn't it dreadful? He's run away from his wife?'[10]
> But I was also a little shocked. Strickland was certainly forty, and I thought it disgusting that a man of his age should concern himself with the affairs of the heart. With the superciliousness of extreme youth, I put thirty-five as the utmost limit at which a man might fall in love without making a fool of himself.[11]
> 'There's only one explanation, and that is that he's not himself. I don't know who this woman is who's got hold of him, but she's made him into another man. It's evidently been going on a long time.'[12]
> 'It can't go on at his age,' she said. 'After all, he's forty. I could understand it in a young man, but I think it's horrible in a man of his years, with children who are nearly grown up. His health will never stand it.'[13]

But life can be full of surprises, and later in life Macdonald wrote: 'Came out here in 1921 at 60! Thinking my life was over. Instead one third of it had to come & another reputation made in Tahiti'.[14]

For Macdonald, the long passage via the Panama Canal offered adventure across two oceans and an opportunity to exercise his drawing skills along the way. In his sketchbook he captured his fellow-passengers and their activities as a pictorial documentary of global travel in 1921. The titles he gave the drawings add an extra dimension to his observations, such as *Doyenne – but no saint*, and *Archangel Gabriel 'Holy of Holies'*. The attraction of a cruise holiday remains popular to this day, but after a six-week voyage surrounded by the same people, bound by the limits of the ship, relations can become strained and boredom can set in. Macdonal drew passengers playing games of chess, draughts, cards and quoits, or simply snoozing and reading (Pl 3, Pl 4, Pl 5). After several weeks at sea there emerged a series of pages illustrating their passage through the Panama Canal, the monotony of the sea now stimulated by tropical landscapes and other vessels.

6 *Houses of Parliament from Millbank*, 1906. Watercolour on paper. Guildhall Art Gallery, London

7 *Stwo sketches of the Thames*, *c*1910. London Metropolitan Archive

Up to this point in his artistic career, Macdonald had travelled across most of continental Europe and North Africa, painting watercolours, and sketching landscapes of towns and cities, lakes and mountains, as well as their people. Boats feature widely wherever there is water in his work. In between his travels abroad and across Britain, Macdonald painted along the banks of the Thames and around the City where he lived in Temple and, earlier, in Richmond-upon-Thames. At the time of a later exhibition of these London works in 1935 (Pl 6), the reviewer for *The Times* wrote:

> On their own lines the 101 water-colours of Old London by Mr. W. Alister Macdonald now on view at the Arlington Gallery, 22, Old Bond Street, could hardly be bettered. Mostly small, they are accurate in drawing but still broad in treatment, with an articulate touch which is a pleasure in itself, and a disposition of light and shade which seldom fails to enhance the architectural character of the subjects. Since the subjects are now mostly demolished the collection has historical interest, but the watercolours can hold their own as attractive little pictures of a kind not often produced nowadays.[15]

By 1935 the art world had been revolutionised by Modernism, but in 1921 when Macdonald left for New Zealand, his meticulous watercolours of street scenes and views of the Thames were already set apart from contemporaries such as Walter Sickert (1860–1942), who painted similar realistic scenes of city life but who worked largely in oils and in a darker palette in a variety of post-impressionist styles. Sickert had learnt from American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), who had spent a decade painting scenes of the Thames. Whistler's tonal effects were also inspiring SJ Peploe (1871–1935), another Scottish painter who was also establishing a reputation in London. It is in Macdonald's rapid watercolour studies of sunsets over the Thames (Pl 7) that he demonstrates an impressionistic and fluid response to the scene in front of him, in order to capture the rapidly changing atmospheric light, more in the vein of Turner and Whistler's sketches.

With an eye for ships, Macdonald could be compared to the English tradition of WL Wylie (1851–1931), who found popularity through the patronage of The Fine Art Society and the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours,[16] and whose manual *Maritime Painting in Watercolour* (1901) could have aided Macdonald's early development. Macdonald's meticulous studies of architectural building details – masonry and ironwork, in boat fitting and rigging – show a rigour and scientific enquiry into the form but also into understanding the engineering of buildings and ships. This was a fascination he no doubt shared with his younger brother and architect, Sinclair Macdonald, while growing up in Scotland on the north coast of Sutherland and Caithness among the herring fleets and shipping that sailed between the North Sea and Atlantic. On the horizon the brothers could see the islands of Orkney, and around them the simple fishermen's cottages of Melvich, while along the coast, to the town of Thurso, there would be the occasional castle and then onward to the opulence of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland's French-style chateau at Dunrobin Castle, which was designed by Sir Charles Barry.

It did not require a keen eye to see the contrast between the tenant and landowner, many of whom had been brutally removed from the inland glens, such as Strathnaver, by the Sutherland's estate managers, to make way for more profitable sheep in the Clearances of 1807—1, and then again in the 1840s and 1850s after the potato famine. This social inequity would have been understood in the Macdonald household, because the father, John Macdonald (1818–66), and his brothers – uncles who latterly fathered Alister and his four siblings as orphans – were Ministers in the Free Church. The Free Church came from a schism in 1843 as a collective defiance against the establishment and the landowners in the face of the hardships of their congregation and cruel demolition of their homes.

> But retribution belonged to God, not man; in one sermon the Rev. John Sinclair, minister of Bruan in Caithness, made the point

explicitly: 'It is true that we often see the wicked enjoy much comfort and worldly ease, and the Godly chastened every morning; but this dreadful rest to the former and a blessed chastisement to the latter.' … The miseries of this life were not therefore simply to be endured but were in themselves a necessary agony for those who wished to attain eternal salvation in the next.[17]

Macdonald would find that there was no escape from this evangelical outlook on life, which was also preached by Presbyterian missionaries in Polynesia. It might stretch the argument that Macdonald's Scottish Presbyterian upbringing informed his approach to painting, even if his family morality was practised more liberally. Comparing him to the American painter John La Farge (1835–1910) who had travelled to Polynesia with Henry Adams in 1891, the American reviewer AJ Philpott in *The Boston Globe* wrote:

… he never lost his reserve. He never 'ran wild' in his color – nor his compositions. And it is fair to assume that one gets a fairer idea of Tahiti in these watercolors than he gets even in Lafarge's work. For Macdonald is at heart a realist and the Tahitian scenes are painted with the same scrupulous care as the English scenes.[18]

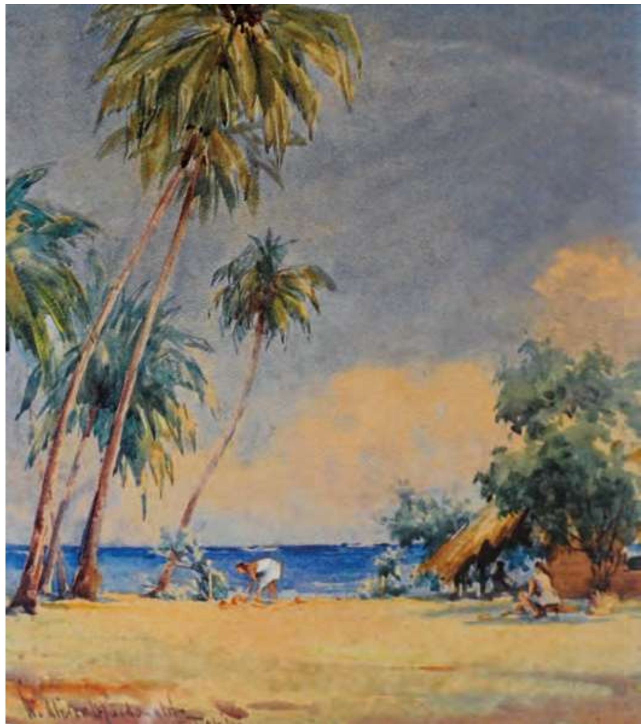
Similar to Macdonald, La Farge 'was no avant-garde hero' and had a similar personal style of 'urbanity and sense of decorum,'[19] but the American artist only spent a matter of months in Tahiti, whereas Macdonald had lived there for a period of 14 years at that time. La Farge only accomplished 36 paintings while in Tahiti, and his vividly hued and somewhat clichéd work was successfully directed at collectors in New York, Boston and even Paris, whereas Macdonald sold locally in Tahiti before returning to London.

The translucent qualities of the light in Southern Tropics were best captured in Macdonald's chosen media of watercolour (Pl 8). This is what separated his work from his contemporaries in Tahiti, who largely worked in oils and some in gouache. The Scot was also older than many of his contemporaries, and with his reserved nature he found steadfast friends among other like-minded creatives who were forging new lives as frontiersmen of the arts. 'No writing is of much use as the regards the Beauty Glamour of the Islands. They must be seen! & felt.'[20]

Macdonald arrived on Tahiti in 1921, in transit to New Zealand (Chancellor 1937) with his young lover, Dorothy Myhill. They never reached New Zealand, instead staying to start a life on the island, perhaps inspired by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). According to Dorothy, the couple lived for a while in the Gauguin old house. With Macdonald 60 years of age, some would call his abandonment of Lucy, his wife of 23 years, and their 11-year-old son Ian, a late mid-life crisis. In fact, after three years the couple parted, and Dolly left, taking a portfolio of 16 sketches in a book that finally returned with her to England, one dated 'from Raiatea August 1921', and including a painting of Gauguin's house. Macdonald remained in Tahiti and found agreeable likeminded company in other Europeans and Americans who were looking for an alternative to the speed and rapid mechanisation of the Modern world.

It was Gauguin who inspired DH Lawrence (1885–1930) to travel to Tahiti in 1922, although for him reality did not match the promise. In a series of postcards to his friend, fellow-author, and lover of islands, Compton Mackenzie, he wrote that the Cook Islands were 'very lovely'. Tahiti, less so. 'If you are thinking of coming here don't. The people are brown and soft. DHL.' To another friend he wrote: 'These are supposed to be the earthly paradises: these South Sea Isles. You can have 'em.'[21]

Tahiti was also the new home to the young writers Charles Nordhoff (1887–1947) and James Norman Hall (1887–1951), both 33 years old. They had sailed from San Francisco in January 1920, both seeking solace and peace from their wartime experiences as fighter pilots over the battlefields of France where 'eight million people were pointlessly slaughtered in five years'.[22] Hall described their motivation in response to the lost opportunity for humanity to take a new turning at the Peace Conference in Versailles:



8 *Tahiti*. Watercolour on paper, 30 x 25 cm.
Musée de Tahiti et des îles, Te Fare Manaha, Papeete

'Our best course,' said my friend (Nordhoff), 'is to retire as far as possible from the mess and muddle to come.' … A discreet withdrawal before we should be sucked into the bog seemed a sensible proceeding, and what better refuge could we find than upon some remote island in the South Sea?[23]

At the start Nordhoff and Hall lived on a monthly allowance of fifteen dollars,[24] accommodation was affordable and they sympathised with the islanders' harmonious ways with the natural resources around them. The soils were fertile, bananas were readily available, and the fishing was good. Once acclimatised, the writers went on their separate ways to accumulate stories and adventures as lived material for their planned books and newspaper articles. Waiting on their return to Papeete was a colonial social life, with the hotel-bar verandahs providing convivial conversation and an exchange of ideas and experiences. Friendships grew with fellow-Americans such as Harrison Smith, a naturalist, the English writer Robert Keable and the Norwegian, Vigo Rasmussen, a schooner captain. In Nordhoff's letters to his parents back in California he describes his friends, and in one shows a learned appreciation of European art: 'It is hard to do fine and masterful work when one has Gauguin, Whistler, Degas, or Manet in mind!'[25] That Christmas he commissioned Macdonald, 'the best of friends', to paint a watercolour:

By the way, I am sending you for Xmas, a watercolor of my little place. I asked the artist, an Englishman named MacDonald – the best of friends – to make it more of a representation than a work of art. I hope he will have combined the two to some extent at least. But in any case it will give you an accurate idea of the place and the cottage.[26]

9 W Alister Macdonald's studio, Patutoa, Tahiti, *c*1926. Photograph, 12 x 16.5 cm. Collection of the author

As they began to carve out their artistic careers in Tahiti one can imagine Macdonald living as frugally as his younger American friends. A photograph of Macdonald's studio in Patutoa from the late 1920s shows the arrangement of window-blinds, thatched roof and bamboo matted construction on stilts (Pl 9). He then moved to Pirae, and the Australian author George Farwell (1911–1976), who lived across the lane from him, described Macdonald's home in 1933:

> A modest little cottage: walls of woven palm fronds, a pandanus thatched roof, one large room with built-in day beds, walls that propped open to reveal the lagoon only metres away, a small kitchen, cold shower and at least a hectare of garden under tall, leaning palms… It was the perfect place to live; in a perfect setting. The light of the Tahitian houses, wrote Gauguin in Noa Noa, is the way they were designed not to shut out the world, but allow nature to enter.[27]

In Papeete larger buildings such as the hotels and town hall were French colonial style brick and wood construction.

It did not take long before the white settlers took Tahitian wives and had families to root them deeper into the island. Hall married Sarah (Lala) Winchester, who was part-Polynesian, and they had two children, Conrad and Nancy. Nordhoff married a Tahitian woman, Christianne Vahine Tua Tearae Smidt, and had four daughters and two sons. Despite being 26 years their senior, and still legally married to Lucy back in London, Macdonald also took a 'mistress',[28] Tipari Tuera (1885–1950) from the island of Rapa, and had a daughter in 1926 called Avril Tuera, whom Macdonald called 'Marie Macdonald'. Years later she recalled how she went to school in Pirae and 'from time to time, in the afternoon, when my father went to visit [the Hall family in Arue], I went with him. We would walk along the beach. Their daughter was my friend.'

In his autobiography, *Rejoice in Freedom* (1976), George Farwell describes Tahiti in 1932 as 'the last truly pagan society on earth, based on the pleasure principle, not supernatural fears or a cult of death'.[29]

> Like some tropical infection, Tahiti worked its way into the bloodstream, dooming a man forever. Many others had no intention of quitting. They belonged. The world began and ended at that beautiful, encircling outer reef. What happened beyond was no longer their concern unless it came under discussion at the Bougainville. To join to this leisurely, unpretentious club on the quai, you needed only five francs and a jacket.
>
> … local beauties greatly enhanced the evening sunset view from the verandahs of the Yacht Club, Cercle Bougainville, and other popular male lounging-places, as they passed between sun and viewer in their promenade along the Broom Road.[30]

On the verandah, with a rainbow cocktail in hand, sitting under the rattan sun-blinds, with a view of the moored schooners at the quay below, merchants, writers, artists and adventurers could socialise. These American, Norwegian, Russian, Polish, Czech, Greek, French and British men 'were of a kind the South Seas will never again know'.[31] Among them he records 'the quiet, white-haired terrier of a Scotsman, Alister MacDonald [*sic*], painter of exquisite watercolours'.[32] They would sometimes be joined by Hall and Nordhoff after a day's collaborative work in their town office, both now on the crest of fame with the success of their novel *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1932). These men were also voracious readers and each generously shared and exchanged their books, with the proviso that they would be returned.[33] Without the distraction of radio the art of conversation kept them intellectually stimulated and entertained. Later in his autobiography, Farwell wrote of Macdonald:

> … this white-bearded painter was a kindly, sensitive character. We had long discussions together amid his easels and watercolours and he lent me books of philosophy, art and fiction from his excellent library.[34]

As for the ambiance of the Cercle Bougainville:

> Behind those bat-winged doors, M. Bohler had brightened his whitewashed walls with French posters, advertisements for Dubonnet and grenadine and out-of-date calendars reproducing Alister MacDonald's evocative paintings of schooners and outer island lagoons.[35]

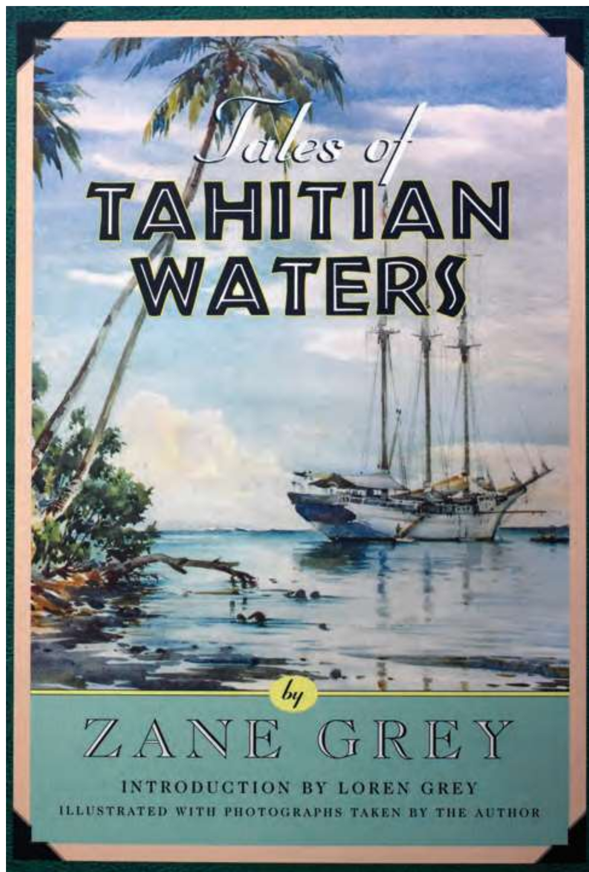
It might be an easy speculation that it was on this verandah that Macdonald's reputation as a watercolourist was enhanced and that commissions were made, but evidence suggests he had a more direct approach from the beach.

Book commissions

In the period between 1930 and 1934, Macdonald was commissioned to illustrate several books by American writers that sought to capture the exquisite and unique life of Tahiti and French Polynesia. In each case the writer was aware of the temporal nature of the island life they lived among and all too aware of the tsunami of mechanisation and commercialisation that they felt would catch them up even on these remotest of islands in the Pacific Ocean. As a watercolourist, Macdonald's technique and media were regarded to be the most immediate and responsive to the light conditions and atmospherics of Tahiti, in contrast with oils, which the artist himself considered a 'loud' medium[36] that would render the island scenes in a more gaudy palette.

In 1927 a millionaire's three-mast schooner called *The Fisherman* moored off a beach in Tahiti.[37] Boats were the subject of many of Macdonald's paintings, honed from his early work published in the *Illustrated London News* of a cod-fishing trip off Norfolk in 1884, and followed by many scenes of the Thames until his departure for the South Seas in 1921. How better to earn a living than by flattering a millionaire with a painting of his schooner in Tahitian waters? Zane Grey (1872–1939), author of *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), *The Lone Star Ranger* (1914) and other Western novels and movies, was the most successful author ever at that time[38] and was undoubtedly Macdonald's wealthiest client. Zane Grey's *Tales of Tahitian Waters* was published in 1931 and Macdonald provided the cover colour illustration (Pl 10) as well as two black-and-white illustrations in the book. These accompanied many photographs of Grey's fishing trophies, of records of his world-breaking catches of marlin and sailfish, of his boats, and of landscapes of Tahiti. Grey describes his meeting with Macdonald, 'an English artist' whose home was near where *Fisherman* was anchored.

> He showed us his fine water-colours, rich in the gold shades and white shadows that make Tahiti so exotic. He had made a very



10 Zane Grey, *Tales of Tahitian Waters*, 1931. Design by W Alister Macdonald. (original image in watercolour on paper)

11 *Tale of a Shipwreck*, 1934. Illustration by W Alister Macdonald (original image in watercolour on paper)

> beautiful painting of my ship. Mr. Macdonald was something of a fisherman himself, with trout tackle, and he interested us much by telling about the nato, a beautiful little fish inhabiting the Tahitian streams. He caught them with the lightest of fly tackle and claimed they were very gamey.[39]

And Grey clearly admired the extra dimension that Macdonald's watercolours capture of the exotic light of the islands, and was inspired to include them among examples of his own landscape photography, even when printed in monotone.

> Four miles out and somewhat to the eastward of our anchorage I had my first view of the most beautiful part of beautiful Tahiti. Nordhoff and McDonald [*sic*] had not exaggerated the magnificence of the scenery. The eastern end of Tahiti was cut into sharp peaks and deep gorges, all mantled in exquisite soft green… Some of the clouds were letting down misty veils of gray rain; some of the canyons were full of golden light, others dark in purple shadow. I gazed until my eyes ached, and forgot I was fishing.[40]

Like a modern day war journalist, Macdonald was 'embedded' in the fishing entourage camped at Vairao, southwest Tahiti, sketching and accompanying their big-game fishing expeditions. Something of Macdonald's character is revealed by Grey:

> We had Alistair [*sic*] Macdonald, the English artist, visiting us at camp, and he went out with us occasionally. Once he complained to Captain Mitchell in this wise: 'My God! Man, if you don't stop eternally watching that bait, I'll go mad.'
>
> That is a clever way to illustrate one of the features of this class of fishing. Not one man in a million would want to do it, and less than that could stand it… I have a peculiar habit of watching my bait, then shutting my eyes for a second, and so on, over and over again, endlessly.[41]

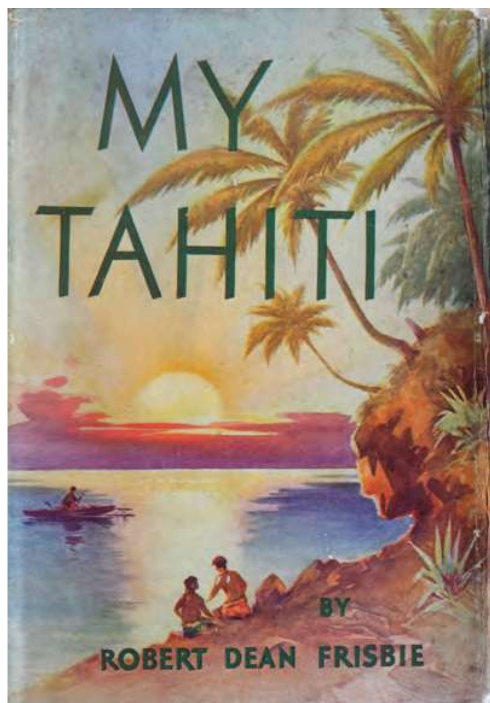
The book had a wide readership, not least among the big-game fishing community, where the account of one particular expedition is believed to have been the inspiration for Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1951).[42] The two writers were fiercely competitive over their record catches. As such, Macdonald's work would have been given a wider audience and appreciation than previously encountered. In December 1932 *Pacific Islands Monthly* reported:

> Mr Alister MacDONALD [*sic*], our celebrated local artist, returned recently from a tour of the Marquesas Islands and the Tuamotos, on the schooner 'Moana'. Many exquisite examples of MacDonald's water colours are to be seen in Tahiti residences, but as the present trip was undertaken expressly for 'L'Illustration' (Paris), we shall have to wait events before any comments may be made on his latest work.
>
> Mr. James Norman Hall, the novelist, was also a passenger on the 'Moana', having spent several weeks in the Marquesas in search of new impressions.
>
> Mr. Hall and his collaborator, Mr. Charles Nordhoff, are to be congratulated upon the outstanding success attending he publication of their latest book, 'Mutiny on the Bounty', which has been chosen by the American 'Book of the Month Club', this alone ensuring a large circulation.[43]

After the success of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1932), Hall had some unfinished business, and in 1934 he published *The Tale of a Shipwreck* and account of his voyage to retrace *The Bounty*'s last voyage to Pitcairn. It was illustrated with 10 monochrome illustrations by Macdonald, works that are of delicate detail and atmospheric, at once showing the drama of the Pacific skies and surf, but also the drama of sailors rowing launches through the reef, or later salvaging what they can from the surf (Pl 11). He described them in a letter: 'The drawings for the *Tale of a Shipwreck* were in monochrome only and simply done for illustration.'[44]

Macdonald had returned to England before MGM Studios began production for the movie of *Mutiny on the Bounty* in June 1935. 2,500 native Tahitians were employed as extras in the film, with 100 outrigger canoes, but the stars Clarke Gable, Charles Laughton, and Franchot Tone remained in Hollywood ,where their Tahitian scenes were filmed using rear-screen projection. The film was the highest grossing film in 1935 and won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It seemed the whole world looked to escape the aftermath of the Great Depression and flee to paradise.

Later in 1937, Robert Dean Frisbie (1896–1948) published *My Tahiti* with a colour dust jacket (Pl 12) and 11 black-and-white illustrations by Macdonald, one of which is dated 1931, confirming they were painted before his return to England in



1934. The book, Frisbie's second publication, describes his first arrival to Tahiti in Spring 1920 as an adventurous 24-year-old, clearly influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson and following in the footsteps of other famous 19th-century South Seas writers.

> Fed up with the complications of a routine world, and imbued with a strong desire for solitude, Mr. Frisbie fled to Tahiti in 1920. Here is his account of his first five years there. Lightly written, full of the charm and grace of the island, the naivete and sincerity of the natives, it shows how those very qualities eventually brought an end to the Golden Age in Tahiti.[45]

In the late 1920s Frisbie lived on the Cook Islands and, on returning to Tahiti in 1930 with his young wife and family, he began to write *My Tahiti*. Macdonald was an ideal choice, having arrived in Tahiti a decade before as well as moving in the same social circle.

Some of the illustrations are of a very different quality and from Macdonald's previous book illustrations. They show island people more close up, and there is more detail of their clothes as, for example, a man labours under a bending pole carrying five large bunches of bananas, while in the background the design and structure of the village houses clearly drawn. In another picture, six young local men fish from an 'outrigger' in sail, which is surrounded by a flock of diving seabirds.

Frisbie's account shows that the 1920s brought considerable change to Tahiti, so that by the time Macdonald left in 1934, at the end of his first of three periods of residency, it was a different place from the one they had all escaped to in the aftermath of the Great War. Perhaps Frisbie found his paradise too intense to endure, as Farwell recalls a rum-fuelled shouting match in the Cercle Bougainville?

> Puka Puka's where everything is still real. I've gotten a whole beach to myself, all the fish and fruit on God's earth, a new girl when I want her'
>
> In a few days he was gone again… He had found his utopia. Yet years later he was reported to have died out there, the cause given an excess of morphine.[46]

In a letter to a young American, Miss Daryl Broderick,

12 Robert Dean Frisbie, *My Tahiti*, 1937. Design by W Alister Macdonald. (original image in watercolour on paper)

13 *Mrs Lucy Winifred Macdonald* by Mrs Joyce Kilburn (1884–1972), *c*1935. Oil on board, 15 x 11 cm. Royal Society of Miniaturists, London

14 W Alister Macdonald's studio Paopao, Moorea, *c*1952. Photograph on paper, 6 x 10.5 cm. Collection of the author

Macdonald explains his version of Frisbie's demise:

> Frisbie I think, I know him as well as anyone – until I left Tahiti in 1939 for some fifteen years! His life is in his book 'Puka Puka'… Self centred yes, but not arrogant. His own worst enemy; too fond of Orange Beer, which he was always concocting. Sociable, distinctly. I liked him & think he had really more of the 'Divine Fire' than either Hall or Nordhoff. And Puka Puka will live because of its unusual setting & experience… Drink & elephantiasis at the end, was too much for him & he died in the Hos. In Samoa (USA) partly disappointed man I am told.[47]

In July 1935 Macdonald returned to Britain, via Sydney, and the Suez Canal on *SS Barrabool*. A year earlier he had received tragic news of the death of his son, Ian, drowned in a sailing accident on the Thames at Greenhithe.[48] He left at a time when, like other painters in Polynesia such as Mordvinoff, Machecourt, Gres and Leeteg, people were 'unaware that an era was coming to an end.'[49]

Pacific Islands Monthly made several reports of Macdonald's work and exhibitions over his time in Tahiti. The January 1935 edition reported:

> Mr. Alister Macdonald, the celebrated water-colour artist, whose exquisite reproductions of Island scenery and colour are so well known to Tahiti visitors, is now holding a final exhibition of his works in Papeete, preparatory to leaving this colony, where he has been a resident for many years. Some of his finest examples-the result a mature experience-are contained in the present collection.
>
> … He has been a life-long devotee of the brush, and is a realistic artist of the old school, who believes in fidelity to nature – something which is rarely found these days.[50]

On returning to London, and after a reconciliation with his wife, Lucy (Pl 13), she organised an exhibition of his Tahitian

paintings at her Arlington Gallery in Old Bond Street in October. 'Among the islands of the South Seas' was a success. This may have been in part motivated by the exhibition earlier in the season in June around the corner at the New Burlington Galleries of paintings by Serge Gres (1899–1970) following a three-year stay in Tahiti. The artists' styles and choices of media could not have been more different, with Gres focusing on figure studies as well as seascapes 'with an uncommon skill, using an unusual technique in which gouache, oil-paint, and shading with pencils of many grades are cunningly mingled'.[51]

It is to his credit, and a measure of their bond of marriage from 1898, that Macdonald remained with Lucy until she died in January 1951, following a long period of dementia and physical fragility. Their last years together were spent in rural Wiltshire, in Lucy's Box Tree Cottage, which she had bought in 1927 while Macdonald was away in Tahiti. They had moved there in 1941 after the windows in their Earls Court home 'had long been blown in'.[52] With no evidence of correspondence available to understand more fully their relationship, this detail offers some proof that Lucy was clearly managing financially on her own while bringing up their son, Ian, at a time when many other women were surviving as war widows as a result of the Great War. Compare this with the account of another constant traveller, the arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922), whose long-suffering wife, Emily, did not regard marriage as a 'life happily ever after'. 'When a man's heart is set in that direction,' she said, 'and especially when he is so suited for the work, one has to put one's own feelings aside – though you know how terribly hard it is sometimes.'[53] The modern-day explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes's own wife, Ginny sympathised, with a 'strict stiff-upper-lip kind of way where you don't show emotions. You don't just sit down and weep. You have to get on with things'.[54]

After taking a month following Lucy's death to tidy his affairs in England, on 19 February 1951 Macdonald departed Southampton one last time, on the *SS Madura* travelling East through the Suez Canal for Columbo and the South Seas. By the time he reached Tahiti many of his old friends had already died. Nordhoff had divorced and returned to California, where he died in 1947, and Robert Frisbie had died in the Cook Islands – 'a man who destroyed himself through the search for beauty,'[55] is how Michener described him. In some ways Frisbie's extraordinary journey also seems the 'standard' American literary life: so much purity of expression ending in frustration and drink. James Norman Hall had remained in Tahiti but had died in 1951, as had Tipari, Macdonald's *vahine*.

Macdonald had already lived a full life when he arrived in Tahiti aged 60 in 1921, and now he was returning at ninety, cognisant that this must be his last resting place. How far away he was from his birthplace and childhood in Sutherland, Scotland. When his nephew, Canadian artist Jock Macdonald (1897–1960), made a return to Thurso to visit the family having spent over 20 years living and establishing his painting career in Vancouver and Toronto, a man he barely recognised from his school days remarked in the street, ' "Hullo James, nothing new, eh!" Time certainly doesn't exist for him… I cannot understand the people who have remained here all their lives + still feel that life has been a tremendous experience.'[56] Geographically, Thurso, Caithness, and northern Sutherland were like islands then, accessible by sea, although linked by a remote railway and a cliff-hugging single track road to Inverness over 100 miles to the south.

With the support of his daughter, Avril, Macdonald received a visa from the French government to allow him to settle in Moorea, an island to the north west of Tahiti and a short ferry from Papeete. He is reported to have returned with no possessions, and was looked after by Avril and her second husband, Benjamin Teraiharoa, who had built his bungalow in Paopao – set in the dramatic scenery of Cook's Bay. Although very different in climate, it is a landscape of steep mountains and mists that would have resonated with Macdonald's Scottish upbringing and time in the Scottish Highlands. His home was ' a humble house, with only one room, in the shade of the coconut palm trees' (Pl 14), next door to Avril and her husband.[57]

Avril later recalled how she would prepare his meals for him. 'He was a very disciplined man… and his 4pm tea was always very important', which he often shared with his granddaughter, Danielle, during school holidays, after which he would have a 'siesta'. She would change the water for his brushes and carry his folding chair. 'He liked to paint at dusk, sitting in his chair on the beach. As soon as the evening star appeared, he said it was his star.' He painted and wrote his letters by the light from an oil-lamp. In the following morning the commissions and letters would be despatched from the wharf to Papeete carried by Mr Tiro on his boat *Mitiaro*. The younger grandchildren would also play with him, looking for bonbons as treats. 'He was never seduced by fame and praise. Fleeing worldly vanity like a new Gauguin, he found his refuge in the quiet of the Islands, from then on living a primitive and happy life in Pao-Pao.'[58]

Retrospective

Although DH Lawrence barely stepped off the boat in Papeete on his passage from New Zealand to San Francisco in 1922, the writer did offer insight into the forces compelling the artist to seek freedom. 'Freedom is a gift inside one's soul', Lawrence declared. 'You can't have it if it isn't in you.' A gift it may be but it is not there for the taking. To realise this capacity in yourself is a struggle. In attempting to follow in the writer's footsteps Dyer asks, 'Of what, then, did Lawrence's hard-won freedom consist?' Catherine Carswell

15 W Alister Macdonald with Mrs Sarah Hall and Miss Nancy Hall, Vancouver, 1937. Photograph, 29 x 20 cm. Musée James Norman Hall, Papeete

applauded Lawrence for the way 'he did nothing that he did not really want to do, and all that he most wanted to do he did'. The perpetual questions of where to go next, whether to stay or to move on, become crucial stations in the itinerary of one's destiny. In this light Lawrence's wandering becomes purposeful, and the gap between resignation and active creation almost insignificant.

A destiny is not something that awaits us, it is something we have to achieve in the midst of innumerable circumstantial impediments and detours. A character in *A Question of Geography* (1987) by John Berger and Nella Bielski expresses this concisely:

> Each one of us comes into the world with her or his unique possibility – which is like an aim, if you wish, almost like a law. The job of our lives is to become – day by day, year by year, more conscious of that aim so that it can at last be realised.[59]

The life of Macdonald reveals an artist who enjoyed a privileged freedom that many of his generation and place of birth could scarcely dream of. He overcame the tragedy of losing a son, the impediments of wars, and his own detours. Similar to the analysis of Lawrence, Macdonald's travels were purposeful and he followed an inquisitive nature that was stimulated by the intellectual company he kept.

The Scottish poet George Mackay Brown (1921–1996), himself brought up overlooking the Pentland Firth in the far north of Scotland, albeit from the Orkney side, argued that to be an artist you had to be regarded as on the fringe of society.[60] Macdonald preferred to work and travel alone, but enjoyed stimulating company and found friends with similar attitudes and values. These were not necessarily typical of Edwardian society in England or Presbyterian Scotland. In 1937 he made a brief return to Tahiti accompanied by the Hall family (Pl 15) and asked his daughter to come with him to England for an education in London. Had she done so they would likely have come face to face with prejudice at best, or in some quarters racism and bigotry amid a society at odds with Tahiti's values and social customs. For his grandchildren and their families still living in Tahiti and Moorea, there is no doubt that Avril's decision to remain with her mother was the right one.

A double-page profile article in *Pacific Islands Monthly* by Walter Smith in April 1954 described Macdonald as 'a remarkable example of a man who has retained his mental and physical faculties far beyond the average span of life. He travels widely, always alone. Two years ago he circled the world'. The article provides a fine portrait of him dressed elegantly with silk polka-dot scarf, wearing a signet ring on his left little finger. With the camera looking up he strikes a commanding pose:

> Frederick Simpson, the well-known photographer of Papeete, reproduces the physical appearance of Mr. Macdonald to-day. He reads ordinary print without glasses. He formerly wore glasses, but some years ago he discarded them, and now says that when one has reached a certain age they are not of much assistance to the eyesight. He attributes his longevity to that wise maxim: moderation in all things.[61]

He had 'a quiet nature and lived simply. He lived in harmony with nature and was totally detached from wordly goods… "as long as I have six months' expenses in hand, I need nothing"'.[62]

Macdonald's life could not have had a more austere or challenging start. The son of a Minister of the Free Church of Scotland, in Brora, at the time of the last wave of Clearances of Highland crofters, he was orphaned at five years of age. Born in the manse overlooking the Clynelish distillery, his could have easily been a short life of excess drinking – or abstinence from any pleasure at all. In contrast, his neighbour in Paopao, the American painter Edgar Leeteg (1904–1953), christened 'The American Gauguin' by his gallerist Barney Davis in Honolulu, had lived out a story of excessive debauchery and drinking 'worthy of an American TV Soap'.[63] A motorcycle accident cut his life short, but relieved him from an incurable syphilis.

In a letter to a Daryl Broderick, who became a pen-pal, Macdonald wrote a brief summary of himself, partly in the third person:

> As to WAM he is rather an unusual man I am told, and a 'miracle' as regards his age and health. (Am in my 95th year). But my eyesight is going, nearly gone! & your letter I can only read with difficulty. Glasses no longer help me. But I can still work as my distant sight is good still.[64]

Later that month in 1955 the Premiere Salon de Tahiti exhibition was held in a temporary gallery at the l'école Paofai, organised by Van der Broek d'Obrenan, Grandidier and Lyon. Judging by his correspondence, Macdonald was possibly too frail to attend in person to be photographed with his contemporaries, but three of his watercolours, *Baie de Cook*, *Tuamotu* and *Vue sur Moorea*, were included in the 329 paintings celebrating European painting in Polynesia, dating from contemporary to the 15th century. Of his contemporaries he rated Adriaan Gouwe (1875–1965), who had arrived in Tahiti in 1927. 'Why make so much fuss over Gauguin?… We have a much finer artist now in Raiatea, Gouwe – a Dutchman. Only he will not finish things & does not paint studio pictures.'[65] A few months later Macdonald reported to Miss Broderick: 'Been ill – a bad tumble. But now all is well & busy! Been disinclined for effort, Lazy in fact.'[66] One grand-daughter admitted years later that she and her young sisters had removed the supports from his chair to tease him after being refused a bonbon, which had led to his tumbling off the chair.

Pacific Islands Monthly reported Macdonald's death on 11 August 1956, following a fall when he fractured his hip.[67] His daughter Avril put the cause down to bronchitis. 'He continued painting until shortly before his death and had no

difficulty in finding a market for his work.'[68] Although Macdonald was recorded as saying 'he plans to end days in his homeland',[69] perhaps by then Tahiti was his true spiritual home. He now rests in the family plot on Moorea, where he was buried with his pipe, folding chair and easel.

A year later a large retrospective Macdonald's watercolours and drawings was mounted in the Tillet Library, Papeete, when the private view was opened by Governor Toby.

> Citizens of Papeete showed a lively interest in the quality of work presented… of the more traditional school of English painters, exiled himself early in the 1920s to the South Seas, where he painted more freely.
>
> He was widely travelled and some paintings shown were executed in China, Japan, England etc. MacDonald [sic] painted until the end though these latter works were [less] assured in their treatment, and (?) tended to muddiness, their [quality] was quite remarkable considering his age.[70]

In the obituary of James Norman Hall in 1951, it was stated that he, similarly, 'never indulged in excesses', and lived quietly in Tahiti with occasional trips abroad. 'Tahiti he regarded as "a grandstand seat to observe the workings of a mad machine age".'[71]

Today, 100 years later, Tahiti is a global tourist destination, popular for weddings and honeymoons, diving and other outdoor activities. Whether it has the power to hold a visitor captive for the rest of their life remains to be discovered by the inquisitive adventurer. Macdonald's paintings remain highly valued and popular among private collectors in Polynesia, America and the UK. One Tahitian collector remarked that his landscapes are timeless, the sunsets framed by palm trees and translucent lagoons remain to be discovered and enjoyed.

> I would not venture to say how many hours, and days, and weeks I have spent, all told, merely looking at that glorious panorama of lagoon and sea and sky, with the mountains of Moorea in the distance, so beautiful at any time of day, and particularly so early in the morning, or at evening when the sun had just vanished behind the mountains. Moorea is all that a South Sea island should be, and it surpasses my most splendid dreams of one, as a boy.[72]

Perhaps another lesson from this study and account of W Alister Macdonald is that no one knows what our lives will hold, how many chapters will unfold. The artist's life does not need to be a flash of intense productivity cut short by excess and tragedy in order to be romantic. Maugham likens the search to understand the artist as a detective story, and this account is no exception. 'It is a riddle which shares with the universe the merit of having no answer.'[73]

The author is the great-great-nephew of the subject of this article

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