To Robert Hancock —
Aksunai! Illitarnamek!
(The Eskimo greeting to a good friend)

A Reader's Digest

REPRINT

THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE MET®

BY RUTHERFORD PLATT

Donald B. MacMillan

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Miriam MacMillan

By Rutherford Platt

THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE MET®

Donald B. MacMillan: explorer, scientist and teacher of courage and beauty to men

Nearly 19 years ago I had the luckiest half-hour in my life. Waiting for a train in Boston, I read a newspaper item about the great explorer Donald B. MacMillan, who was soon to take his famous schooner *Bowdoin* to Greenland again. That very morning I had learned from a botany journal that Danish scientists had found fossils of elm and maple trees 300 miles above the Arctic Circle in Greenland. Excited at the possibility that this island on the roof of North America had been warm and verdant in a distant past, I wondered if MacMillan would be interested in checking to see if there once had been a Greenland forest.

I wrote MacMillan at his home in Provincetown, Mass. He replied and invited me to go along as the expedition botanist. "But you understand you must be a member of the crew," he said. I agreed, figuring this would involve only minor chores.

So in June 1947, I arrived on Fishermen's Wharf, Boothbay Harbor, Maine, to join the MacMillan Polar Expedition. Before stepping aboard I paused to watch the salty-looking men in dungarees hustling around in a confusion of rigging. Suddenly I felt like a new boy at school. How

quickly my incompetence would show among these old hands!

"Where can I find the Commander?" I asked. One of the men in dungarees pointed straight up. There, high in the rigging, I saw the 73-year-old MacMillan, in shabby pants and a paint-splotched canvas cap, vigorously applying varnish to the mast. He waved, reached for a halyard and slid down. "Glad you got here, Rud. Your bunk is midships, portside. You'll take the wheel next week."

MacMillan had the strongest voice I had ever heard, yet there was a profound quietness about him. His essential quality was poise. It gave him an aura of trustworthiness, the mark of an unquestioned leader. If this compact, blue-eyed man with the Down East twang has confidence in me, I thought, maybe I *could* help sail the ship. Within the hour I was polishing brass on deck.

Formula for Courage. At mess that evening I found that most of the "old hands" were no more schooner men than I. There was a geology professor from Illinois; a 70-year-old Pennsylvania pretzel manufacturer; a surgeon from Maine; students from Harvard, Trinity, Bowdoin. We were a dozen men, aged 17 to 70, all alien to the sea; yet we formed a crew, made ready and sailed away to the polar regions. To MacMillan we were his "boys." He treated each inexperienced hand as a responsible, trustworthy seaman. On your first trick at the wheel Mac was there, casually pacing the deck. You did not realize that he was watching. Then he ordered a little to starboard, to port. He never showed any doubt that you could do your job. And, somehow, you didn't let him down.

On that 1947 expedition, in his quiet manner and with few words, he taught us his philosophy of life. We learned about courage, the practical matter-of-fact kind that MacMillan had made the keystone of his life. Usually courage is thought to be resoluteness or boldness. Mac's brand was simply the knowledge that he was prepared for any emergency. I was middle-aged, a little soft around the middle, had never done anything more adventurous than hunt for woodland plants, but I came to believe Mac's message: courage *is* available to everyone. Keep a level head, he taught us. Do your best; remember that courage is just a matter of being ready when the unexpected happens.

I can still hear MacMillan's voice from the ice barrel high on the for-

ward mast—it was tremendous, booming, overtopping the roaring wind. Who could be afraid with a captain who could out-yell the wind? But he never boomed an oath. Once, on a dangerous course among icebergs, he called down, "Hard a-starboard!" to avoid a berg. In the excitement the helmsman turned to port. The schooner struck with a terrific bang. MacMillan said nothing. How that boy worked to redeem himself in Mac's eyes!

As we plowed northward, Mac was always observing, studying the actions of clouds and sea, the feel of the wind, the behavior of birds. He had come to know every mile, almost every dangerous rock, on our course—along the coast of Maine, past Nova Scotia, along Labrador, across to Greenland, up to within ten degrees of the North Pole.

A Man Called Nalegak. At Greenland, we put in at Eskimo villages. MacMillan was a great hero all along the Labrador and Greenland coasts. The Eskimos called him *Nalegak*, the Leader. When we sailed away from Umanak (today the site of the Thule Air Base) every man, woman and child of the Eskimo tribe of North Greenland came to line the shore and wave good-by.

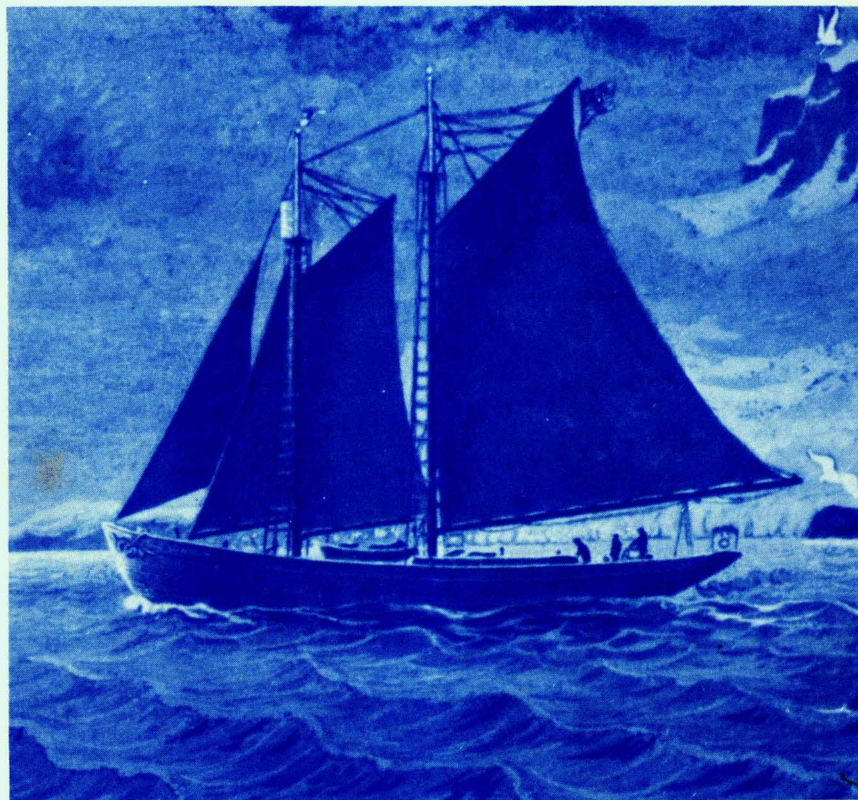
Part of MacMillan's strength came from his seafaring ancestors. His mother was a shipbuilder's daughter, his father a captain of fishing schooners when Mac was born in 1874 in Provincetown. His father was his hero, strong and weather-beaten, who told exciting tales of the sea. Every year his father sailed away for months, and each fall mother and son climbed the dunes to watch for a sail. One November, when the boy was nine, they watched for a sail that never came. Schooner and all hands were lost at sea, probably in a deadly nor'easter off Newfoundland.

Only the year before, Mac had shared his father's cabin as far as Nova Scotia. It was the peak of his young life: the creak of timbers, the thump of boots on the deck overhead as he lay in his bunk, the magic circle of the horizon with him and his father in the middle. Now, in lonely night hours, he fought his soul's battle—and chose not to surrender to the terrible fear of life.

To help his mother, Dan, as the boy was nicknamed, picked cranberries after school, skinned codfish, pumped the organ on Sundays. Three years later, he turned sorrowfully from his mother's grave.

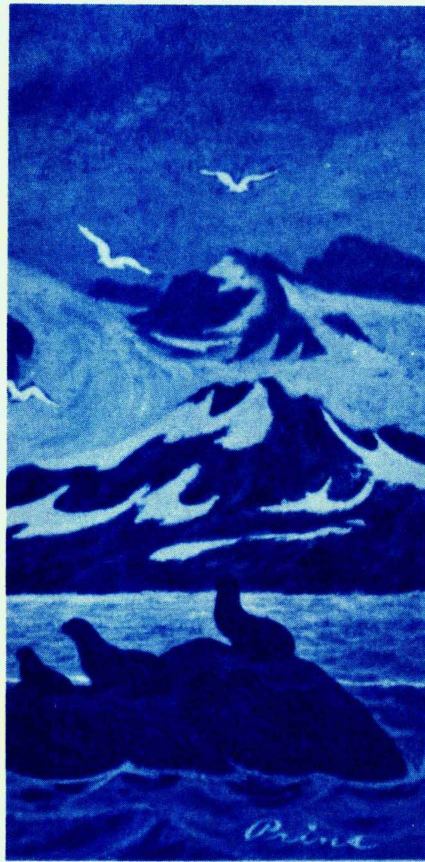
In Freeport, Maine, where he went to live with his married sister, he studied with burning curiosity. "To learn something" became the overpowering passion of his life. In his senior year of high school the principal called him in. "You must go to college." Dan said he had no money. "You must find a way to go," the principal replied. Bowdoin College was nearby and, to earn his way, Dan worked as high-school janitor, sold books house to house, drove a milk cart, ran a private gymnasium, taught country school.

He was clearly cut out to be a



teacher. After his graduation from Bowdoin, he became principal of a high school at North Gorham, Maine, taught at a preparatory school in Pennsylvania and then, in 1903, went to Worcester Academy in Massachusetts as the gym director. But schooners, salty tales and a boy's dream were not forgotten.

A Taste of Adventure. In the meantime, MacMillan had established a summer camp on the Maine coast to teach boys navigation and sailing. One night he heard cries for help. Dan jumped into the camp dory and saved six people whose boat was wrecked on a reef. By outlandish chance, four days later he again heard cries for help. This time he pulled four people out of the treacherous waters. Robert E. Peary, the arctic explorer, who had a summer house near the camp, heard about the rescues, made inquiries about the young teacher and developed an interest in him. In the spring of 1908 came a telegram: "If interested in arctic exploration, come see me at once, New York City. Robert E. Peary."



Dan went, then rushed back to school to tender his resignation. "MacMillan," the headmaster said, "I do not accept your resignation. When you get over this crazy idea of freezing to death, come back here where you belong." Today, 58 years later, Dan MacMillan is still on leave from Worcester Academy.

On the Peary expedition of 1908-9 MacMillan saw a fantastic polar world—fleets of gleaming icebergs parading in the sea, cliffs painted flame-red by lichens, birds glittering like golden snowflakes in the setting

sun. All too soon the fabulous adventure was finished. How could he return to the polar planet—on his own, without money?

The next three summers Dan made it as far as Labrador. Finally, in 1913, he commanded the famous Crocker Land expedition—a black thread of 19 men and 165 dogs who emerged from a schooner in North Greenland and filed westward along the north unexplored rim of America, living like Eskimos on polar bear and walrus.

No Relief in Sight. For two years the expedition made soundings, collected data on walrus, polar bear, musk-ox. Then the men returned to the rendezvous in Greenland during the summer thaw to wait for the relief ship. But the ship failed to get through ice-blocked seas. MacMillan spent another winter surveying. Again they waited; again there was no plume of smoke on the horizon. MacMillan headed the teams into another unexplored region. He shouted his dogs on and on—in four years he and his sledges crisscrossed 10,500 miles of the polar region. That fourth summer MacMillan again waited at the rendezvous, surrounded by 200 boxes of specimens and a restless crowd of Eskimos and dogs. This time they saw the plume of smoke, and so ended his historic dogsled expedition.

In those four years, Dan had become quieter, more inward. He had seen, instead of the dread arctic night in which so many men perish or go mad, "indescribable beauty

and serenity." Perhaps only the brave can know such beauty. He returned to civilization with an astounding idea which was to enable him to be at once explorer, scientist and teacher of men.

Arctic Shuttle Service. He designed a schooner like none other ever built. She was double-ribbed, sheathed in ironwood, with a spoon bow able to lift up and crack down an opening through an ice field. She had an engine that could burn a mixture of whale oil, seal oil and kerosene. To pay for this ship, he would run a shuttle service to the polar north. Scientists and students would buy a bunk, be the crew, learn seamanship, toughen their spirits with adventure.

The plan of making such voyages with amateur crews seemed madness. But men believed in his dream, and the beautiful ship was built. In 1921, when the schooner *Bowdoin* sailed on her maiden voyage, she was recognized as one of the strongest wood ships in the world (she still is). Graceful as a seabird, she became the nucleus of a unique institution of learning. The "boys," today teachers, scientists, doctors, leaders of industry, brought back pictures, records and collections which flowed into universities and museums. MacMillan spread the message of courage—and arctic beauty—through his lectures and books. In all, he ran 18 polar expeditions—taking 300 gentlemen sailors far beyond the Arctic Circle and bringing them back again, every one.

After 14 years of *Bowdoin* expeditions, Dan, at 61, married Miriam Look, the daughter of an old friend. He says with a twinkle in his eye, "I waited for her to grow up."

Three years later Dan decided to let Miriam accompany the expedition as far as Labrador, then return on the mail packet. After glorious, sea-tossed days she was packing her duffel to leave when a man handed her a paper: "Lady Mac is a good scout. We, the undersigned members of the 1938 MacMillan Expedition . . . unanimously elect her a member of the expedition."

Thereafter Miriam was part of the crew.

Sail On, Sail On. During World War II MacMillan sailed with a crew of bluejackets to locate airfields in Greenland. His *Bowdoin* led Navy supply ships through the fog, among reefs, into the fjords. In 1954, Congress commissioned MacMillan Rear Admiral, U.S.N., Ret., "in recognition of invaluable services."

That was the year I sailed north with him again. In Greenland, he took an interest in every specimen collected by his crew, from rocks to the embryo of a little auk. He was then in his 80th year. Nothing warned us that the trip home would be the most adventurous of all.

We had sailed south as far as North Labrador, and were lying peacefully at anchor in Hopedale that October when MacMillan noted that the glass had dropped an inch in an hour. To sea! We put out and rounded a headland and dropped

both anchors. Then a great wind, Hurricane Hazel, struck. Our anchors held.

Next afternoon the weather was still rough, and we continued south inside a chain of rocky islands. There were no beacons here, for ships do not navigate inshore in the dark. As twilight fell, we were still inside, with waves thundering on rocks all around.

It was my trick at the wheel. MacMillan stood close by in silence. "Hard starboard," he said in a quiet voice. We were headed into the breakers on the mainland rocks! MacMillan concentrated on the outlines of rocks against the dim glow of the western sky. "Hard port." We swerved, all but sucked into the crashing surf. "Hard starboard!"

I never felt the power of MacMillan's authority more. This course seemed suicide, yet nobody uttered a sound. Only MacMillan knew that there was a gap in the rocks—and we slid through the hellish surf with rocks so close you could almost touch them on either side. Suddenly we were floating peacefully in a little harbor. Instinctively I grasped Dan's hand. He muttered under his breath, "Just a stunt." Later he told me that he remembered the harbor's location because a North Pole expedition had called there—41 years before!

Now I understood the MacMillan miracle, how he brought back his "boys" without losing a man. Luck? Of course. But the infinite pains MacMillan took reduced the need for luck. Mac hadn't been afraid because every minute he had known precisely what he was doing. He met many perils but few surprises.

After 38 years and well over 200,000 miles the *Bowdoin* with MacMillan, 85, on board, sailed to her final berth in Mystic Seaport, Conn., where today thousands of visitors every year walk the deck.

Last summer some of us went to call on Mac in his home overlooking Provincetown Harbor. He was in his 92nd year but, as we sailed into the bay at ebb tide, Mac came splashing out into the shallow water through the wind and cold waves to shake hands. In the evening, after Miriam's tangy haddock chowder and broiled lobsters, we settled down in the living room, among tall lamps made of spiraling narwhal ivory, polar-bear rugs, walrus harpoons, fantastic Eskimo carvings.

Presently Mac became thoughtful. "The *Bowdoin* is still seaworthy," he said. "Perhaps we could get together some of the boys and take her to sea for a day or two." At that moment, we were all once again on the familiar deck, with the billowing sails white against a blue sky.

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