

Chapter One

The Early Years of the Maine Sea Coast Mission, 1905–1922

Alexander MacDonald was a large man with an impressive, quiet presence. Who was he? What were his origins? How did he become the driving force in the founding of the Maine Sea Coast Mission? It is an amazing story.

Prior to the founding of the Mission, various religious groups had expressed concern for the welfare of the Maine coast fishermen and their families. Captain George W. Lane used his own boat to sail along the coast of Maine, distributing religious literature and establishing Sunday schools. His health, however, did not permit him to continue his work. Subsequently, the Portland Maine Missionary Society grew interested in establishing missionary work for a “larger parish.” Angus MacDonald was a member of a committee that looked into this idea. This led Angus and his brother, Alexander, to found the Maine Sea Coast Mission in 1905.

It was abundantly evident that ministering to fishermen on the coast of Maine was no job for the faint of heart. It was a courageous undertaking, inspired by the desperate plight of Maine’s fishermen and their families. Alexander Mac-



Alexander MacDonald c. 1920

Donald, a good man with a passionate calling, did not fear a challenge. He was a thoughtful preacher, calm and humble, yet at times had a flair for drama. While standing on Green Mountain (now Cadillac Mountain), surveying the many bays and islands flung out around Mount Desert Island like stars in the sea, he suddenly opened his arms, clapped his brother on the shoulder, and cried, "Angus, what a parish!"¹ In a more somber mood he stated in hand-written notes, "The purposes of said corporation are to undertake religious and Benevolent works among the neglected communities and isolated families along the coast of Maine."² It was no mistake that the "r" in religious was in lower case and the "B" in Benevolent was capitalized. MacDonald recognized that to succeed, benevolence would need to trump religion, at least initially. While he was thrilled by this challenge, he also understood the enormity of the task. Maine's coastline covers approximately 228 miles; however, with all its bays, coves, and inlets it measures almost 3,500 miles. Then there are the islands, some far out to sea. This was the vast parish of the Maine Sea Coast Mission. How to get around? A boat was the answer; however, as we will see, the first two boats were barely up to the task. Alexander MacDonald cautioned all involved: "To sail a sloop... along the broken coast of Maine in all kinds of weather is no small undertaking"³—quite the understatement.

We know little of MacDonald's origins. His grandfather came from the Isle of Skye, a "misty, rock-girt" island in the Hebrides. He and his siblings grew up in Valleyfield on Prince Edward Island off Nova Scotia. He has been described as a tall, broad imposing figure of a man who spoke with a Scottish burr. His eyes were windows into his soul. People who knew him said his eyes often danced with joy and humor, but could be sharp and thoughtful, yet full of pity and wisdom. He was a skilled and able seaman and loved to build and construct: churches, chapels, homes, and schools. One woman quipped that he left a whole village of buildings along the coast of Maine. He organized people to do this and then worked along with them.

The Maine islands were like home to him, reminding him of his life on Prince Edward Island. His understanding of the island mind and its anxieties made him a perfect fit for this work. The Maine coast is unimaginably glorious and beautiful in all the seasons, but in the early 1900s, as MacDonald well understood, behind the beauty lurked hardship, poverty, and isolation. He came from a family "poor in this world's goods," but he was able to attend Bowdoin College, graduating in 1891, and then graduating in 1894 from the Theological Seminary at Andover, which later became affiliated with Harvard Theological Seminary. Obviously he was bright and gifted in many ways.

When he was a student at Andover, MacDonald interrupted his studies to teach school on one of Maine's many islands. This would bring him both experience and much needed money to continue his studies. While waiting in Rockland for the steamboat to arrive, he overheard a man say that a woman on one of the outer islands was gravely ill. She had kept a Sunday school for her own children as well as others on the island, although there had never been religious services there. All her life she prayed that she might be baptized before she died. "Well," said the man as he looked at the wind and the heavy sea, "I guess that prayer, like lots of others, won't be answered." Young Alexander MacDonald turned in his steamboat ticket and found a fisherman to take him to the outer island—a passage that would have been terrifying to many. He found the woman, called her family together, and baptized her. He took bread and a cup of water and gave her communion. There, in that island home, he resolved that the Maine islands would be his parish and that no lonely soul who lived on an island would ever pray in vain for comfort and blessing.⁴ The seeds of the Mission were sown.

The MacDonald brothers were so determined to establish a mission that prior to the first organizational meeting they had purchased a twenty-six-foot sloop, *Hope*, and had hired Captain Henry E. White as the first missionary. At the

initial meeting, July 11, 1905, these steps were endorsed and the vote stated, "We are proud to organize as a Society to care for the mission work along the coast."

The original board of directors consisted of the following members: president, Angus M. MacDonald, pastor of the Congregational Church in Bar Harbor; vice president, Jefferson C. Smith of Bar Harbor; treasurer, Thomas Searls



The Hope, 1905



the age of seventy-three.

Other floral rugs mentioned elsewhere: Ames's *Welcome* rug, *Matinicus Floral*, *Floral* chair seat, Bunker's *French Floral*, *Pansy* rugs, and her other floral rugs.

Shell Rugs

We have only one rug with shells. It is an extraordinary example of how the women's skills and sophistication grew over the years. Sadie Lunt created a marine still life using a chromolithograph for inspiration. The size of the chromolithograph is 13 by 19.5 inches and the rug 27 by 48 inches, so Sadie must have had the artistic ability to enlarge the image, perhaps with the help of others. The chromolithograph is a dark, rather sinister image of shells and seaweed, yet Sadie has transformed the image into a lovely warm delight. During a cold Maine winter she was clearly thinking tropical.



◀ *Still Life, Tropical Marine*, size, 27 by 48 inches,
Courtesy: Alexandra Wolf Fogel

Sarah “Sadie” (McKusick) Lunt (1877–1962), born in Denmark, Maine, married Alphonso Lunt, a fisherman, around 1899. They settled in Frenchboro on Outer Long Island. They had three children: Alphonso, born in 1900, died at age eighteen; Gertrude, born in 1901; and a stillborn daughter in 1908.⁹ Sadie was yet another woman who lost children.



Sarah “Sadie” Lunt c. 1930

A Mission photograph of Sadie, when she was about fifty-three years old, is a testament to her rugged, hardscrabble life. A comment by Peasley accompanied the photograph: “This is Aunt Sarah. She is a member of the Christian Brotherhood of the coast, and the Mission is the dearest thing in

her life to her. She is looking for the *Sunbeam*. She heard the whistle, and knows that it means a call from the Missionary and a meeting at the chapel to-night.”¹⁰

Sadie died in 1969 at ninety-two years of age. The second photograph of Sadie was taken just before her death.



Sarah “Sadie” Lunt c. 1969, Courtesy Alexandra Wolf Fogel

It amazes me to think that despite her difficult and harsh life, Sadie produced a hooked rug of such delicacy, charm, and beauty. Peasley encouraged the women to see the world with their eyes opened to beauty. This is exemplified in Sadie’s *Still Life, Tropical Marine*.