

*Ranald MacDonald: The Narrative of His Life, 1824-1894*, ed. William S. Lewis and Naojiro Murakami. Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1990. Pp. 350. Illus. \$30.00.

Northrop Frye observed that although historical narratives incorporate unifying forms "to tell a historian that what gives shape to his book is a myth would sound to him vaguely insulting." It is unclear how the authors of *Ranald MacDonald: The Narrative of His Life, 1824-1894* (first published in 1923) would have felt about such a statement. There is little question, however, that they found it not only permissible but indispensable to tamper with the historical facts. In the process, they endowed Ranald Macdonald with "heroic qualities" and facilitated his rise from relative obscurity to his present status as a folk hero.

The thesis of the text is abridged on the monument erected to Macdonald in 1988 at his birthplace at Fort George, present-day Astoria, Oregon. It reads:

Ranald MacDonald, First teacher of English in Japan. The son of the Hudson's Bay Co. manager of Fort George and Chinook Indian Chief Comcomly's Daughter. MacDonald theorized that a racial link existed between Indians and Japanese. He determined to enter Japan although it was closed to foreigners. . . . Sailing in 1848 as a deckhand on an American whaler, he marooned himself on Rishiri island near Hokkaido. While awaiting his deportation he was allowed to teach English to 14 Japanese scholars, some of whom became leaders in the modernization of Japan. He spent his active life in Europe, Canada and Australia. He is buried in an Indian cemetery near Curlew, Washington.

Almost all of this statement is factual, yet in the juxtapositioning of the information fabrication is created. Jean Murray Cole's "Afterword," which has been added to this reprint, sounds the warning note, and historians are cautioned to read her comments before beginning the text.

In brief, much of the manuscript was not written by Macdonald, but was the work of another fur trade son, Malcolm McLeod, an Ottawa lawyer, who, with Ranald's assistance, incorporated Ranald's narrative into various manuscripts of his own. In the course of this undertaking in the early 1890s, the elderly McLeod, who had never been to Japan and the aged Macdonald, who had lost his Japan notes, turned to other books, especially Richard Hildreth's *Japan As It Was and Is* (1855) for inspiration. At times, the borrowing bordered on plagiarism, but more often it instructed McLeod and refreshed Ranald's memories, allowing him to "see" again what he had viewed briefly some forty years before.

As Metis, McLeod and Macdonald were sensitive towards native peoples and sought to create a positive image of them. With this in mind, McLeod infused the narrative with generous lectures on brotherly love and Christian duty, and it was he (rather than Macdonald) who theorizing a racial link between the northwest coast Indians and the Japanese which cast both in a favourable light.

In the early 1920s, however, when William S. Lewis and Naojiro Murakami "discovered" Ranald's manuscript (actually Ranald's handwritten copy of one of the McLeod-Macdonald manuscripts), it was widely believed that "nature" was more important than "nurture." As a consequence, they distorted some of the correspondence between Macdonald and McLeod in their "Biographical Accounts of Ranald Macdonald," which precedes the narrative, to reinforce a biological interpretation of Ranald's actions and perpetuated the notion (first put forward by E. E. Dye in her *McDonald of Oregon* in 1906) that Ranald's favourable attitude towards and treatment by the Japanese was directly related to his inherited "Indian characteristics." In reality, however, Ranald, who was raised as a middle-class youngster, was unaware that his birth mother, who died shortly after he was born, was a Chinook Indian until after he returned from Japan. In official Japanese documents, Ranald is listed as a "Canadian," and there is no indication that the Japanese believed him to be either an Indian or a half-breed.

To simply decry the untruths or complain that the thirty years Ranald spent in British Columbia have been left out of the text leaves little over for ascertaining what is in many respects a remarkable story of a remarkable man. Whatever else might be said, Ranald's narrative has captivated readers for more than sixty years and no doubt will continue to do so in the future. For the "Friends of MacDonald" who are responsible for the publication of this facsimile edition and for thousands of other Japanese and Americans, the myths in the narrative are of secondary importance to the message in Ranald's story that "international boundaries are no barrier to friendship."

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*Note on Spelling:*

Ranald spelt his last name *Macdonald*. Lewis and Murakami, who edited the text, spelled it *MacDonald*. Eva Emery Dye spelled it *McDonald*, the same way Ranald's father Archibald McDonald spelled his last name.