

George Heath MacDonald (Class of 1911): The Story of One Graduate from McGill University's School of Architecture

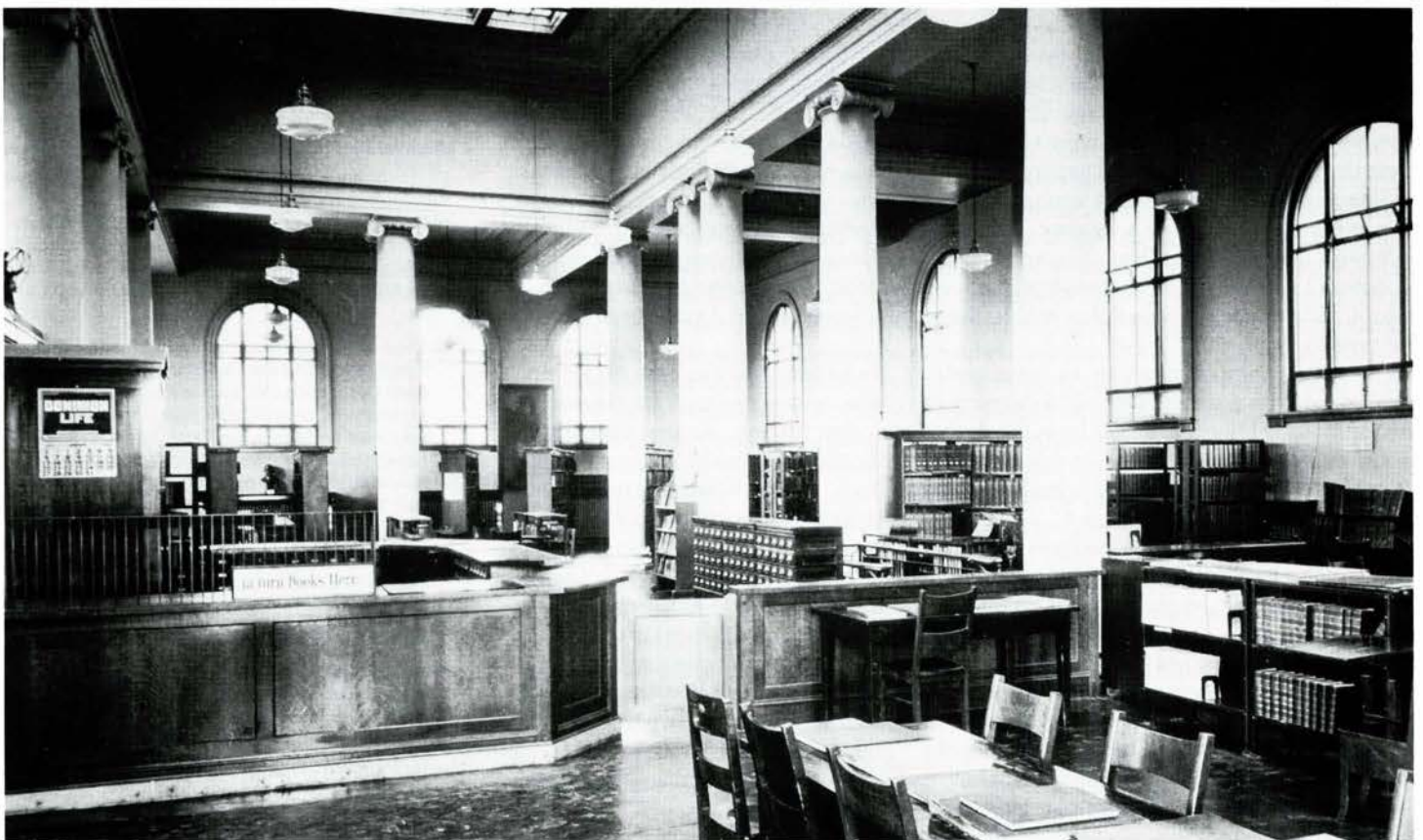


Figure 1. Interior of the Edmonton Carnegie Public Library; MacDonald and Magoon, architects, 1922-23. (*RAIC Journal* 3, no. 4 [July-August 1926]: 156)

George MacDonald was one of Edmonton's most prolific architects during the first half of the 20th century. His career spanned more than half a century and was highlighted by buildings such as the Edmonton Public Library (**figure 1**).¹ MacDonald had returned to Edmonton—where he had worked as a draftsman and student architect since 1904—following his graduation from McGill's School of Architecture in 1911. Like other graduates of McGill, he had to adapt his academic training to a location where building traditions, materials, and processes were different from Montréal. As a student, MacDonald may well have questioned assignments which to him would have appeared far removed from the real world. Yet he later humbly recalled the importance of his formal training at McGill, and the role played by educators such as Percy Erskine Nobbs.²

by Percy Johnson

George Heath MacDonald was born in Murray Harbour North, Prince Edward Island, on 16 January 1882.³ His roots can be traced to British Loyalist stock in the United States. At an early age he took a strong dislike to the career options of farming or lobster trapping, so actively cultivated his ability as an artist. At the age of 16 he left Murray Harbour North to work as a draftsman with the Dominion Iron and Steel Company in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It was in Sydney that MacDonald's association with Herbert Alton Magoon (1863-1941) began, first as a draftsman and ultimately as a partner.

Influenced by the decline in construction in the Sydney region and a corresponding increase in the optimism for growth in the Canadian west and the future provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Magoon and MacDonald made their way to Edmonton in 1904. MacDonald continued to work as a draftsman with Magoon while he completed his high school matriculation at Alberta College during the 1904-05 and 1905-06 academic years. At Alberta College, MacDonald was active in football (soccer) and hockey, and served as the president of the Athletic Association for the 1905-06 term. In a brief biography of MacDonald, the Alberta College yearbook *College Echoes 1905-06* noted that "...his hands were to draw the plans of Alberta College, his orders were to direct its erection; in return, the College was to equip him for his future work."⁵

After initially considering the architecture school at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, MacDonald decided instead to enroll in what he later referred to as "the new course at McGill."⁶ At McGill he received an education based on the Beaux-Arts principles popular at the time.⁷ He was a member of that transitional generation of Canadian architects between office-trained practitioners and professionals educated within the programs then developing at various Canadian universities. MacDonald graduated from McGill at the age of 29 with a strong mix of office experience and classroom instruction. While it is difficult to fully assess the importance of MacDonald's student years at McGill on his future work, some of the recorded events from the time hint at the school's lasting influence on his later career in Edmonton.

The only extant student drawing by MacDonald is an exercise for a third-year design problem, dated March 1910 (figure 2). Assigning design projects for hypothetical structures, whether a museum, a stock exchange or, in this case, a clock tower, had a long tradition in Beaux-Arts architectural training, and is consistent with the approach taken by many architectural schools, including McGill, during the early 20th century. MacDonald's drawing, labelled "Design for a Clock Tower, Plans and Elevations," is the work of a confident and mature draftsman. Some descriptions of MacDonald's work in Edmonton newspapers during the 1930s and 1940s state that MacDonald received honours for his work while a student at McGill, though no concrete proof of awards has been located.

While a student at McGill, MacDonald encountered Percy Nobbs, an architect and teacher he later described as one of the two persons he considered "this century's pioneer Canadian educators."⁸ MacDonald also received practical training during the summers; in 1908, for example, he worked as a draftsman in the office of Edward and William S. Maxwell. That firm's time sheets from November 1901 to March 1909 record projects for a variety of corporate and individual clients with which MacDonald was associated.⁹ During the years MacDonald spent in Montréal he also began to develop a strong network of friends and colleagues, which he utilized throughout his professional career.

The time spent at McGill also introduced MacDonald to the architecture of Montréal and the surrounding region. Although there exists no record of MacDonald's travels during his school years, it seems likely that he journeyed to centres in the American northeast: the striking similarities between the Edmonton Public Library and the Boston Public Library suggest that MacDonald had studied the latter.¹⁰ It was not unusual for architects to travel, and for regional architects it was essential to examine various buildings first-hand if the most up-to-date technological and design solutions were to be learned. This practice was followed extensively by MacDonald (and many of his patrons), as demonstrated by the numerous references to on-site examinations of design solutions in other locations—and the use of other buildings as models—in the correspondence connected with MacDonald's commissions.

The importance of MacDonald's extensive travels across North America and his eclectic interests influenced much of his work. He was a founding member of the Edmonton Art Club, a writer who was commissioned by the federal government to research and write two texts on early Edmonton history, and an avid traveller and

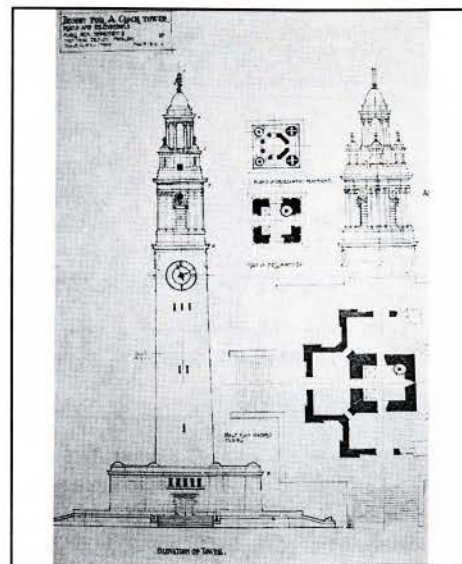


Figure 2. George MacDonald, "Design for a Clock Tower, Plans and Elevations," third-year student design project, McGill University, March 1910. (Provincial Archives of Alberta, George Heath MacDonald Collection, #78.11)

- 1 For a complete description of this and other noted buildings by MacDonald, see the author's Master's thesis entitled "The Edmonton Public Library: An Architectural History of a Carnegie Library Building" (Montréal, Concordia University, 1994).
- 2 Additional, more direct, influences by Nobbs on Edmonton's architecture include his work on the layout of the University of Alberta campus and the design of its Arts and Medical buildings, his suggestions for the design of the Provincial Legislative Building, and his recommendation of Cecil S. Burgess as head of the university's new School of Architecture.
- 3 MacDonald died in 1961. Biographical information can be found in John Blue, *Alberta, Past and Present* (1924), 3:284-85, and MacDonald's obituary in the *Edmonton Journal*, 3 May 1961, 49. While this obituary states MacDonald was born in 1883, most sources give 1882 as the year of his birth.
- 4 Like many other architects of the period, Herbert Alton Magoon received no formal education in architecture, having received his training in the offices of other architects. For a sometimes contradictory account of Magoon's training and background, see Archibald O. MacRae, *History of the Province of Alberta* (1912), 2:893-4, and Magoon's obituaries in the *RAIC Journal* 18, no. 5 (May 1941): 40, and the *Edmonton Bulletin*, 1 April 1941, 9.
- 5 *College Echoes 1905-06*, 22.
- 6 Letter from George Heath MacDonald to John Bland, director of the School of Architecture, McGill University, dated 17 October 1960.
- 7 For a description of the elements included in an education based on these principles, see Kelly Crossman, *Architecture in Transition: From Art to Practice, 1885-1906* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).
- 8 This description is included in the dedication to MacDonald's *Fort Augustus, Edmonton: Northwest Trails and Traffic* (Edmonton: Douglas Printing, 1954). The other educator was Dr. John H. Riddell, a founding member of the Edmonton Public Library Board.
- 9 William and Edward Maxwell Archive, Canadian Architecture Collection, Blackader-Lauterman Library of Art and Architecture, McGill University (Montréal).



Figure 3 (left). Proposed house for C.J. Robert, 211 Street, Edmonton; Magoon and MacDonald, architects, June 1912. (Private collection)

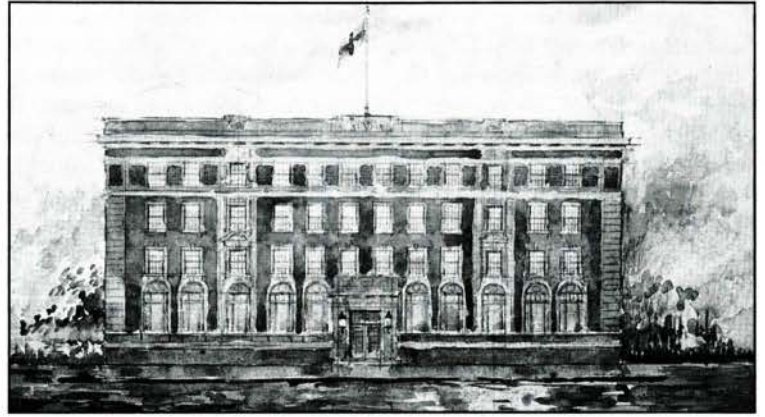


Figure 4 (right). Drawing of the front facade of the Edmonton YWCA; Magoon and MacDonald, architects, c. 1921. (Private collection)

sports enthusiast. During the First World War he worked for the federal government in Toronto and Montréal supervising munitions.¹¹ During the Second World War he designed several municipal aircraft hangers and other airport buildings used on the northwest staging route to the Yukon.

After MacDonald graduated from McGill University with honours in 1911, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Architecture, he returned to Edmonton in time to profit from a period of building growth not equalled until the oil boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹² His continued association with Magoon was formally recognized in the partnership Magoon and MacDonald. From the outset it is evident that MacDonald assumed the role of designer and Magoon, who sought the clients, the job of office manager. By the early 1920s, however, MacDonald was becoming responsible for more and more of the managerial tasks as well as continuing in his role as the design partner in the firm. MacDonald's contributions were recognized with the name of the firm being changed to MacDonald and Magoon, beginning in 1922.¹³ MacDonald and Magoon remained partners until Magoon's retirement in 1938.

MacDonald retired in 1958, his career as a licensed architect spanning more than 40 years. Between 1911 and 1958 MacDonald was involved in more than 180 projects in Edmonton alone. Much of his work reflects the education he received at McGill, modulated by the evolving trends in Canadian architecture during the years surrounding the two world wars. Some Edmonton examples, in addition to the Public Library, which depict the variety of his work are the numerous houses he designed (figure 3), the Ruthenian Girls School (1912), the YWCA (1921, figure 4), the Salvation Army temple (1925), and the buildings for Concordia College (1930).

GEORGE MACDONALD PRIDED HIMSELF AS A MCGILL GRADUATE. Two years after his retirement from a career as one of western Canada's most prolific architects, MacDonald received a letter from the director of his former school. In response to a questionnaire from professor John Bland, obviously doing research on the role played by McGill on his career as an architect, MacDonald noted that his schooling at McGill included a thorough knowledge of construction and of the work of the past, including the necessary utilitarian courses, [that] provided solid groundwork, lacking somewhat in general educational subjects such as Latin, which [he believed] would be of value to the student.¹⁴

Like other graduates from McGill University's School of Architecture, MacDonald never forgot the training he received while a student in Montréal.

10 For support of this theory, see John Bland, "Over-night Trains to Boston and New York Made Montreal 'American,'" in *Selected Papers from the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, vol. 2 (Annual Meeting, 1977), ed. Christina Cameron and Martin Segger (Ottawa: SSAC, 1982), 46-64.

11 Various sources state that MacDonald worked in the United States during the First World War, but there is no record of duration or location. Since MacDonald's son Alan Stewart MacDonald was born in Québec in 1919, it is apparent that MacDonald spent some time there that year.

12 The value of building permits issued for Edmonton in 1912 was not surpassed until years after MacDonald's retirement. Edmonton thus provided very fertile land for implementing the new ideas learned by this very recent graduate of McGill.

13 One of the first projects to appear under the new name of MacDonald and Magoon was the Edmonton Public Library (1922-23). It merits mention that this project also involved Marjorie Hill, a recent graduate from the University of Toronto and Canada's first registered woman architect.

14 Letter from MacDonald to Bland dated 17 October 1960.

Percy Johnson is a Montréal-based architectural historian and doctoral candidate at l'Université Laval. He was responsible with Laura E. Dent for the compact-disc inventory which accompanies *Moshe Safdie, Buildings and Projects, 1967-1992* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).