A Foot in the Door

The Reminiscences of Lucile Mc Donald

With Richard Mc Donald

Foreword by Lorraine McConaghy

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A Foot in the Door

"Look, Lucile," he said, "you want to get your foot in the door of a newspaper and what does it matter how you do it? You can show them after you're there the stuff you're made of. Any job will answer right now."

Judge John H. Stevenson, 1917
Advice to 18-year-old Lucile Mc Donald as she contemplated becoming a cashier with The Bend Bulletin.

Foreword

Lucile Saunders Mc Donald was one of the foremost American newspaperwomen of the twentieth century, as well as a successful writer of juvenile fiction and popular history. She was also a woman of deep and intriguing contradictions. Mc Donald was a dreamer with a strong practical streak, and a highly private person who came most alive in public print. In the flapper era of chic "girl reporters," Mc Donald was chubby and dowdy, awkward around the newsroom lotharios. Brusquely outspoken, she was nevertheless self-conscious and easily wounded. Her colleagues joked about her self-absorption—and she did talk about herself and her work obsessively—but she was a generous mentor and teacher.

She was often disarmingly frank and full of fun, but she could also be harsh and cynical. She would sit up late at night, typing out patient replies to twelve-year-old admirers, but budgeted little time to family and friends. Extravagantly ambitious, she had a huge appetite for work but valued a wide readership far more than the approval of historians or other journalists. A lifelong professional writer, her prose nevertheless is at best workmanlike, at worst tiresome and mechanical. A reluctant feminist, an awkward leader, an irritable follower—this autobiography is the carefully crafted product of all these tensions.

More than a decade ago, Lucile Mc Donald was kind to me when I phoned to ask her help researching a local history topic. She made it plain that I was wasting my time in graduate school and should get an honest job. But she was clearly pleased that I was thoroughly familiar with her work. She invited me to her home and opened her files to me. I became one of her many acquaintances. Years passed, and we occasionally encountered one another at the archives. We didn't need to "catch up"—all we knew about one another was our shared interest in local history, and that was

enough. So, in the fall of 1991, I felt comfortable dashing off a note to her, suggesting that she publish an index to her newspaper articles on Washington state history. She replied promptly, inviting me to visit and discuss the project.

When I saw her, I was shocked at how pale and thin she was. It was clear that she was very ill, but she volunteered no information about her health. I hesitated to ask. We discussed the index and then she said, "I want you to take a look at something." She handed me a thick typescript of *A Foot in the Door*. It was clear from the first paragraph that this was her autobiography. "Read it! Read it!" she said, turning back to her chair.

Lucile Mc Donald was not a woman readily given to reflection. We had attempted an oral history interview in 1984, and she would only consent to tape-recording if she could read aloud from her correspondence—for an hour, with no questions and no analysis. Reminiscence was heavy going for her, and I regarded the manuscript before me with apprehension. Mc Donald settled herself, bright-eyed with anticipation. Always eager, she wanted me to read the entire autobiography *right now*, and she waited and watched me for three hours.

I had known little about her, really. She was very vital and always working hard, with a project just completed and another coming up. Her focus had always been on the task at hand, not on those in the past. She had lives as a historian, a journalist, and a novelist. Yet despite her single-minded devotion to writing, she never burned out; she always faced each new writing task with youthful enthusiasm and vigor. I knew her only as a newspaperwoman and historian, and was scarcely aware of her career in fiction.

I read through the manuscript, pausing to write notes, conscious of her rising level of impatience, until the final page was turned and she burst out, "Well? It's good, isn't it? Of *course* it is!"

It was remarkable. Born in 1898, Lucile Saunders Mc Donald's professional life spanned seven decades. She wanted to become a career journalist when very few women had challenged the man's world of the newsroom. She wanted to be an adventuress when dutiful young women married well and set their course to their husband's star. Lucile Mc Donald had been so different. She disliked her mother, dropped out of the university, was arrested as a streetwalker, married in secret, induced a miscarriage, made

enemies, was thoroughly professional, and never gave up. She was a singular woman. It was thrilling to read about her life and her accomplishments in her own words.

But, I asked, what about her daughter, whom she had mentioned in her "interview" with me? Why did "Mac" Mc Donald fade from view? Did she ever miss the life of a foreign correspondent and regret her life choices? What was it like working with Zola Helen Ross, with whom she wrote several books? She had often dismissed her academic critics—how did she evaluate her own career as a historian? What did she think of the emerging new Western history? What did she have to say to young women just starting writing careers? Why had she ended the autobiography with her retirement from *The Seattle Times* and not mentioned the twenty-five years of productive life that followed? And so on. I was fascinated with what the autobiography offered, and intrigued by what it withheld. I wanted to know more. She was briefly annoyed; then she went and fetched another file. It was an entirely different manuscript autobiography!

Over the months before her death in June 1992, hospice volunteer Karl Thunemann and I worked with Lucile's son, Richard Mc Donald, to put her mind at ease about the autobiography and other publishing projects. After her death, Dick and I found three more lengthy autobiographical accounts, and innumerable diaries, journals, and letters. Her earliest life-history writing, I believe, is from the 1930s. Mc Donald's last manuscript stood as one in a series of many constructions of herself, a final set of decisions driven by the cumulative successes, disappointments, and tensions in her life. Over fifty years, Lucile Mc Donald wrote five "autobiographies"—life stories of five different women. As editor, Dick has had the difficult task of seeing his mother's life as a whole, when she herself was unwilling to do so. Working from her manuscripts and other personal files, inter-weaving versions, writing editorial bridges, Dick has created the rich book you have in your hands.

Mc Donald's scribbled childhood diaries reveal a girl delighted by the pleasures of writing and eager for a "real career" in print, away from her Oregon home. At nine, she wrote in her journal, "I began my novel today." At twelve, she was single-mindedly preparing for life, practicing character sketches and transcribing pages of overheard dialog—work habits she would retain for a lifetime. She

planned to be happy, if she could manage it. She didn't intend to be like her father, she wrote, "spending his working years under one roof at something for which he had no great liking." Determined to live and write in South America, Mc Donald learned Spanish in high school and read hungrily about Brazil and Bolivia. Her career, she hoped, would bring her exciting adventures in faraway places, but her girlhood reflections were matter-of-fact—she wrote lists of what to pack when traveling overseas. And she also prepared herself professionally, outlining future novels, writing for the high school magazine, *The Spectrum,* and mailing copy to *The Oregonian.*

After graduation, Mc Donald began studying journalism at the University of Oregon but she was restless and discontented in school, ready to get on with her life. Like many woman journalists of her generation, she took advantage of the opportunities of the wartime homefront, when newspaper circulation skyrocketed and many male colleagues were in uniform. During World War I, she dropped out of the university and went to work on the Coos Bay *Times,* the Bend *Bulletin,* the Salem *Statesman,* and the Portland *Oregonian,* working her way up through the papers, and learning the business.

In 1920 she headed off to South America to write free-lance features, with the comfortable fallback of an arrangement with *The Oregonian* to publish any stories that touched on Oregon places and people. The practical adventuress risked her life on mountain trails but kept body and soul together writing publicity for the American Chamber of Commerce. In Buenos Aires, she patched together a living as a writer until hired by the United Press wire service as night editor. UP invited her to return to their main office in New York, and she married Harold "Mac" Mc Donald, her Oregon beau, in that city on Christmas Day, 1922. They kept the marriage secret to preserve her job, but Mac was unhappy in New York. Bound by love and duty but with profound misgivings, Lucile Mc Donald quit and the couple returned to Oregon.

Lucile Saunders Mc Donald tried hard to turn Mac into another bold adventurer, and made every effort to combine her career with his. Together, they moved to Alaska, where she was news editor for the *Cordova Daily Times.* Then, Mac landed a dream job that freed the young couple to rove through Europe, and on to Egypt and Turkey. It was an incredible time, and every Oregon dream

seemed to be coming true. Dick Mc Donald was born in Paris in 1927. Lucile Mc Donald became the *New York Times* correspondent in Istanbul, and covered a wide range of news. However, she was always less fascinated by the political or economic situations in which she found herself than by exotic surroundings, interesting people, and tales of history.

But the Depression sent the Mc Donalds home again to the Pacific Northwest, and Mac tried first one thing and then another. The family moved frequently. Lucile Mc Donald settled into "the domestic rut" with considerable reluctance, and her autobiography is largely silent about her frustrations. She worked through them. In 1939, Mc Donald wrote a revealing article for *The Matrix*, the publication of the journalism sorority Theta Sigma Phi. Entitled "Career versus Soup Kettle," Mc Donald's article described the "writing woman's" dilemma as she struggled to remain creative while dealing with colic, fruit canning, and ironing. A woman of her times, Mc Donald firmly believed that a mother belonged at home, and suggested ingenious schemes for housebound writers to juggle their writing with domestic responsibilities. She urged women to consider her solution: writing juvenile literature. Lucile Mc Donald never wasted anything, and she found that she could revise and publish the bedtime stories she told her son. Better still, when he asked how a windmill worked, she researched the answer and was on her way to a book, *Windmills*, one of her most successful.

In the 1940s, Mc Donald met Zola Helen Ross in a creative writing class at the University of Washington, and they became fast friends. The two women collaborated on eleven novels of juvenile fiction, usually mysteries, sometimes with historical settings. Mc Donald provided the timelines and background for the books while Ross developed the characters and dialog; they worked together on the plots and revised one another's prose. They were comfortable collaborators, though Ross once replied to a questioner who asked whether she ever challenged Mc Donald's research, "No! I'd sooner question God!" To readers fifty years later, these novels seem stilted and sentimental. However, they met not only with considerable commercial success but were often chosen as featured selections by the Junior Literary Guild. They brought Lucile Mc Donald national fame as a professional writer.

During World War II, as American men went off to war, women took their places, whether in shipyard, airplane factory, or newsroom. Lucile Mc Donald went to work on *The Seattle Times* copy desk, and stayed with the paper for more than twenty years. When she retired from *The Times*, she was well known as the Northwest books editor and a Sunday magazine feature writer. At *The Times* in the 1950s, Mc Donald began concentrating on historical features, and devoted a long series of articles to state and local history. Beautifully illustrated by Parker McAllister's watercolors, these feature stories highlighted interesting sites around Washington state, and then settled down for an extended study of Lake Washington and King County. In this period, her fiction and non-fiction work also increasingly concentrated on historical themes, notably her biographical study of James Gilchrist Swan, *Swan Among the Indians*. During the 1950s and 1960s, Lucile Mc Donald was at her professional peak, writing fiction, working at *The Times*, and developing as a regional historian.

Mc Donald retired from *The Seattle Times* in 1966, and Mac Mc Donald died five years later after a long and difficult illness. With him or without him, she was as restless a retiree as she had been a housewife. All her life, she wrote every day and in every circumstance, whether ill or on vacation—why would retirement be any different? As she tartly remarked, "After I retired, I refused to surrender to arthritis and bridge." Her files for the final thirty years of her working life are as packed with notes, manuscripts, and plans for projects as those for the first thirty. In 1977—when she was seventy-nine years old—Lucile Mc Donald went to work for the Bellevue *Journal-American*, writing brief weekly articles on the local history of east King County. She continued to write for *The Sea Chest*, the journal of the Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society, and published histories of the Alaska Steamship Company, Sammamish Slough, Lake Washington, and Bellevue. But the weekly *J-A* columns offered her the journalist's structure of deadlines, a set number of column inches, and the public relationship with her readers.

She once wrote of that relationship in her diary, in her frank way:

> I now hear myself referred to as "historian" and "Seattle's well-known writer." It seems that if one does what one does

> every day *long enough*, it sooner or later becomes a distinction. But for me, without an audience, what becomes of my writing? What difference would it make?
>
> In my case, I guess, writing is something like acting, and I always want my audience with me. I can see why I was never content with the copy desk and why I had to achieve a by-line. That was what made me tick and always kept me on solid ground.

The *Journal-American* by-line kept her on solid ground for nearly ten years, throughout her eighties, and Mc Donald wrote more than four hundred columns. These little stories *paid attention* to local history in rural, industrial, and suburban King County, not just Seattle. Mc Donald emphasized the primary material of history, educating her readers that their family snapshots, diaries, and letters provided evidence for understanding the past. Many of her articles were based on oral history interviews with eyewitnesses to events or with descendants of longtime Washington families. In addition to personal and family material, Mc Donald used public records, old maps and newspapers, and museum collections to research her columns. She showed ordinary people how to conduct historical research, and she brought popular attention to the issues of heritage—from historic preservation of sites and structures to funding for local historical societies. Above all, Mc Donald gently educated her readers as she entertained them.

In the five years preceding her death, as she revised and polished her autobiography, a steady stream of journalists and local historians visited her little house in Bellevue, Washington. Peppery, gracious, bright, Mc Donald charmed her visitors. She matter-of-factly remarked that she had been the first woman news reporter in South America, the first American woman to visit Machu Picchu in Peru, the first woman copy editor in the Pacific Northwest, and the second woman overseas correspondent for the Associated Press. As early as 1936, Ishbel Ross's pioneering *The Ladies of the Press* had acknowledged her achievements as a successful woman in journalism. But Mc Donald was quite businesslike about her own accomplishments. Younger women who hoped to find a fiery feminist were disappointed; she claimed repeatedly that her gender had made no difference to her career. Yet her autobiography and her personal files tell another story, and she kept a careful

list—as she did of everything—of the men who had slighted her abilities or blocked her career advances.

Mc Donald's files and collection of local historical material have been legendary for thirty years. These meticulous and voluminous records contribute greatly both to our understanding of regional history and this remarkable woman. Lucile Saunders Mc Donald documented and interpreted Pacific Northwest history for five decades, and her files are a historian's delight. Published and unpublished manuscripts, interview notes, notes for speeches, photographs and photocopies, folders of clippings, maps, programs, drawings—it is an extraordinary collection. The bulk of this material has been donated to the University of Washington Library by her estate, and now we may all profit from Mc Donald's magpie nature and careful record-keeping. But, in the last analysis, how shall we evaluate her contribution as an interpreter of these records?

During her lifetime, Lucile Saunders Mc Donald received countless awards for her activities in all three of her professions, and she treasured them. All her life, she devoted considerable time and energy to professional organizations. As a journalist, she was prominent in Theta Sigma Phi and Women in Communication. As a writer, she was active in the Seattle Free Lances, and helped to found the Pacific Northwest Writers Conference. As a historian, she belonged to half a dozen historical societies, and was an ardent lobbyist for heritage issues, including local history museums, historic preservation, and improved history education. Her work paid well, and she was very proud of that. In understanding Lucile Mc Donald, it must never be forgotten that financial success and wide readership were as important to her as the approval of professional colleagues.

Lucile Mc Donald's principal work fell between the fields of journalism and history, and consequently her achievements have not been viewed with clear focus. To many journalists, her writing has seemed wooden and her work boring or frivolous. Mc Donald quit the only job she ever had as a beat reporter, seldom challenged a source, and was never particularly interested in analysis. Her idea of aggressive journalism was writing all night to meet a deadline, not "dishing the dirt and calling it a revelation," as she once scornfully characterized investigative journalism. To her younger colleagues, Mc Donald was a quaint relic.

On the other hand, many historians have faulted Mc Donald's history, and she responded with scarcely concealed belligerence. Her research was careless and her interpretations hasty and superficial. She absolutely refused to document her books, and many of her references remain unnecessarily mysterious. Likewise, she brought a combination of sentimentality and romanticism to the historic worlds she explored. Mc Donald often portrayed early European and American settlers in the Pacific Northwest as larger-than-life heroes and heroines, and wrote of their lives with uncritical admiration.

But those very weaknesses became her strengths in making state and local history *popular* by writing about the past for ordinary readers in mass-market books and in daily newspapers. She used every hook she could think of—nostalgic, syrupy, or sensationalistic. She never forgot her "audience," as she called her readers, and tried to write for everyone. Lucile Saunders Mc Donald was a popular historian and a historical journalist. That was a noble calling, and she was eminently successful at it. Her files are packed with letters from readers—stories, tips, clippings, compliments, and complaints—and she tried to reply to them all. People confidently expected her to save buildings and rescue collections of photographs or documents. They wanted her to tell their family's story, or the history of their neighborhood. And she was eager to do those things.

Her final book to be published while she was alive came out in 1990, when she was ninety-two. *Making History: The People Who Shaped the San Juan Islands* has all the strengths and weaknesses of a lifetime spent at popularizing history. Lucile Mc Donald wrote about state and local history for fifty years, and made old photos and maps, archaeology, and old-timer reminiscences available and interesting to ordinary people. That was her great contribution to our public understanding of the past. This autobiography will endure as a revealing account of her remarkable life, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy it and join me in honoring her memory and achievements.

Lorraine McConaghy
Seattle, Washington
April 1995

Preface

From her high school days, Lucile Mc Donald wanted to be a writer. She managed to overcome a childhood of emotional and economic poverty to become a pioneering woman journalist, a prolific author of feature articles and children's books, and a respected historian. This unusual autobiography was originally written as two separate manuscripts. She finished the earliest in about 1975 and completed the later portion, covering her Seattle work, in 1980.

Lucile died in 1992 at the age of 93. Until her last months she never stopped writing. Left behind were some 55 file drawers of papers which in large part are now at the University of Washington Library. In examining this huge volume, it's hard to imagine all was typed on a mechanical typewriter with flimsy carbon copies. Lucile came from an era when telegrams were the basic means of long-distance communications, travel was by train or steamship, and papers were fastened by pins.

This story concentrates on 70 years of journalistic achievements. Much more could have been added about her historical contributions, children's publications, volunteer work, and activities in Pacific Northwest writing groups.

My role as editor has been to compress and smooth out the original text with minimal impact on content and style. To eliminate narrative gaps and to share more emotional accounts of certain episodes, I have introduced other material from her speeches, letters, or notes. As I am Lucile's son, I was able to clarify certain passages and give the names of persons not fully identified.

Prior to this project I had not fully appreciated all the hurdles Lucile overcame, particularly the lack of a nurturing childhood. Having a limited college education was not a handicap until later when academic presses rejected her history books. She had never

learned how to document references! Another surprise was learning how often my mother changed career and home locations.

She left much about her life unsaid in the original manuscripts. For example my father was constantly away from home and would not have been an easy man to live with. Lucile included hardly a word about family problems (except her mother), although her letters suggest otherwise. She was very close to her younger sister; yet Iris's name was not mentioned in the original manuscript.

I always felt my mother was a careful and thorough reporter without ever inventing facts to fill out a story. Even though she had no mechanical aptitude she could write credible accounts of technical matters such as the workings of a stone quarry. Her skill was in preserving the informant's words.

After her reputation became established in the 1950s, Lucile evolved into a popular speaker about writing and local history. Included in her correspondence are many thank you notes from school teachers, organizations such as the Kiwanis, historical societies, and writers' groups. She was also always helpful to young women reporters. Sometimes, though, she would interrupt them saying, "You're not asking the right questions."

To summarize her career, the appendices include a chronology of events, a list of "firsts," a bibliography, and a list of writing awards. Although she achieved many "firsts," she never set out to advance women's rights. As she explained, "I just happened to want jobs men usually had."

Without the concerns of historian Lorraine McConaghy, who has written the foreword, and humanitarian Karl Thuneman of Bellevue, Washington, this manuscript might never have been published. During Lucile's last months they recognized the value of her unpublished works and found ways to proceed into print, with Lorraine making the initial contact with the Washington State University Press.

Richard K. Mc Donald
Bellevue, Washington
May, 1995

Lucile Saunders poses with her parents Rosa (Wittenberg) Saunders and Frank Saunders in Portland, *c.* 1905. *Photo courtesy Richard Mc Donald.*