

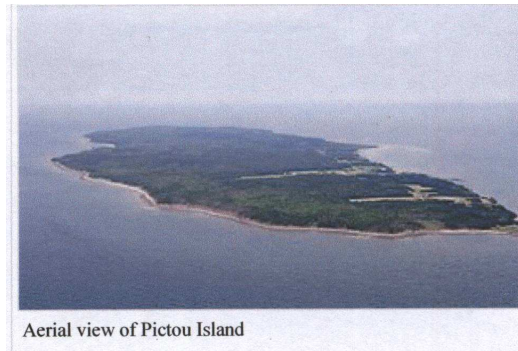
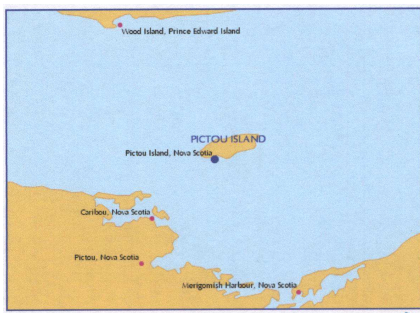
## **THE LIFE OF MARGARET (MacCullum) MacDONALD**

### **By Gloria Stephens**

Margaret's nursing career was exceptional as she gave her life to the service of others in a quiet and unassuming manner and always with humour and a smile on Pictou Island, Nova Scotia for forty years.

To completely understand Margaret's situation, the living conditions in the 1930's on Pictou Island must be explained.

#### **PICTOU ISLAND in the 1930's**



Pictou Island is seven kilometers long and two kilometers wide, a 'speck' in the Northumberland Strait, twelve miles from NS and between Nova Scotia and PEI. The island is completely cut off from NS during the winter months from ice flows and the only way to get supplies was by ice boats. Generators were used to run appliances, propane for fridges and wood burning stoves for cooking and for heating the home but not too successful as the homes were not insulated as of today's standards and often snow would actually blow into the home through cracks etc., hand pumps at the kitchen sinks to get water from the well, kerosene lamps lit homes and barns and fires were the biggest concern for folks as many homes and barns were lost. Folks carried lanterns enabling them to find their way along the one road on the island, radios were a luxury but every household had a phone by the 1920's.

#### **MARGARET'S 40 YEARS NURSING CAREER ON PICTOU ISLAND**

When there was five rings on the phone, Margaret knew that it was a call for her help and grabbing her coat she was off running to assist at whatever was needed

Margaret was a 'community health nurse' a 'nurse practitioner' (before the term was used) as she performed nursing duties above and beyond the normal scope of practice and what would be expected of a nurse in today's world. She was the only prepared medical person on the island during a forty year span and at least two generations of Pictou Islanders were dependent on Margaret's nursing skills and her generosity for their survival. Margaret's life would not only inspire young nursing students but the population as a whole.

Besides bringing up a family, she welcomed strangers to her home, saved patients from death, delivered over 60 babies and saw an equal number of islanders through their illness to their death. She was a 'nurse practitioner' in the truest sense of the word as she stitched up wounds, nursed comatose stroke and Alzheimers patients for weeks at a time, she set bones, accompanied seriously ill patients or injured ones by boat or emergency helicopter to a mainland hospital. Often she walked all alone from patient to patient in fierce winter storms and darkness beyond belief. She registered all babies and would do daily visits for two weeks, tending to mother and baby. Her saddest moments, she once remarked, was when a mother or baby died, she faced many inherent delivery problems. If she knew ahead of time that trouble was evident she made arrangements to have the mother sent to the mainland hospital in NS. Margaret washed and prepared bodies for burial if the undertaker was not available, wrote the death certificate, the obituary and led appropriate funeral services and would accompany families following the old tradition as they kept vigil through the night with the deceased. Margaret prescribed natural remedies sometimes, like salt herring wrapped and put at a patient's feet to bring down a fever and for diarrhea, a tablespoon of molasses with a teaspoon of pepper. She paid for a lot of her supplies from her meager personal savings.

Margaret was also the government contact for all sorts of messages and official information, for instance in 1942 she had to deliver a message to the family that their son was killed in action in Holland

Through two decades of dedicated nursing care and community work Margaret did not receive a government salary except toward the end of her nursing career, when the Municipality of Pictou County, NS, granted her a small annual stipend to buy medicine for the use on the island. Margaret never had a complaint and accepted gratitude with a shrug; "I was just doing my job".



Besides doing all this, Margaret raised her own two sons, cooked, baked canned and other household duties in her very modest clapboard house surrounded by her beautiful flower garden which she loved. Gardening was her one relief and means to 'gather her own strength' to carry on her work.

MacDonald's home

## MARGARET'S PROFILE

Margaret was born January 16, 1897, the second of four siblings and the daughter of Presbyterian Scots, Charles and Anne MacCullum, who settled on Pictou Island in the early 1800's. Charles was a farmer and lobster fisherman. He also made sure the West End lighthouse was always functioning; Anne ran a small store from their home

Margaret's parents instilled in her a strong work ethic, how to be self-sufficient and the community members showed her the usefulness of teamwork.



Margaret & Jack

Margaret died December 2, 1977, at the age of 80 and is buried in Seaview Cemetery, Pictou.

Margaret married at the age of 38 in 1932 to Jack 'Happy' MacDonald, a fisherman and the island's west lighthouse keeper. They had two sons three years apart.



West lighthouse



Ron



Keith

(Keith is the father of Myrna, who provided the pictures and is Granddaughter to Margaret)

## EDUCATION

Margaret's early schooling was in the one-roomed schoolhouse from primary to grade 9. She had to complete her high school grades 10 to 12 through correspondence. At the time, finishing high school was a huge achievement for an 'island girl'. Her life-long dream was to become a nurse, so at age 18 she left the island heading for Montréal April 1915 in a blizzard on the 'mail-dory' ice boat. The trip took two days.

As the ice was breaking up the six-man crew of the ice boat had to row between ice pans and then haul the boat over the ice pans with the blizzard raging. Margaret helped all the way and was glad when the mainland was reached at dusk. Next morning by horse and wagon she was taken to the town of Pictou and boarded the train to Halifax. Here she took the CNR daily express train to Montréal.



Margaret entered the Royal Victoria General Hospital School of Nursing and three years later, 1918, graduated with honours as a Registered Nurse.

## WORK EXPERIENCE

Following graduation, Margaret worked at the Royal Victoria General hospital for two years. She then moved to Gardner, Mass. Here she worked at the Gardner Memorial Hospital for fifteen years. She lived with a brother and helped to look after the family of four children.

In 1932 her sister Anna, living on Pictou Island became ill with TB, so Margaret returned home to take care of her sister. Unfortunately, Anna died within three months.

Margaret had been away from home for seventeen years and getting accustomed to life on the island was somewhat of a shock to her, being used to all the comforts offered at the time on the mainland. Getting used to living without the conveniences of 20<sup>th</sup> century urban life was certainly a challenge in itself. However, Margaret took up her nursing career living on Pictou Island.

## COMMUNITY WORK

Margaret worked tirelessly in community work as well as her commitment to the ills of the Islanders. At Christmas she was the 'main-stay' for getting celebrations going; plays, concerts and delivering home baked food to those in need. She was a Women's Auxiliary worker and made numerous quilts as 'fund-raisers' for any community need or cause. Margaret was the 'glue' to hold the Islanders together through thick and thin.

## LEGACY



Margaret had an unselfish life and well lived in the service to others.

Margaret in 1927