

ARTISTS ON THE BAY: J. E. H. MacDonald at Pointe au Baril

By Nancy Lang and Rebecca Middleton

J.E.H. MacDonald (1873-1932) was a graphic designer, landscape painter and one of the original members of **The Group of Seven**. Along with Lawren Harris, MacDonald was a spokesman for this radical band of painters, whose work was not appreciated by art critics of the day. A painting exhibited by MacDonald in 1916 was likened to a ‘drunkard’s stomach’ and the same critic suggested the work be retitled ‘Hungarian Goulash’. The Group of Seven, who first exhibited together in 1920, spent much of their time painting in Algonquin Park, around Lake Superior and on Georgian Bay.



Known to his friends as ‘a wonderful poetic soul, full of humour and patience’, MacDonald immigrated from England to Canada when he was 14 to apprentice in a lithography firm.

MacDonald was a frequent visitor to Go Home Bay, south of Parry Sound. In 1915, his host, Toronto art patron Dr. MacCallum, commissioned MacDonald, Tom Thomson and Arthur Lismer to paint murals of local scenes for his cottage as a surprise for his wife’s birthday. Inaccurate measurements meant paintings had to be ‘cut down’ when installed in the cottage living room the following spring. These paintings now hang in the National Gallery of Canada.

The Supply Boat,
1915-16, J.E.H.
MacDonald

National Gallery of
Canada



MacDonald returned to Georgian Bay in 1931. Though frail after suffering a series of heart attacks, MacDonald carried on with his painting. In need of providing an income for his family, he also held a full-time position as principal of The Ontario College of Art in Toronto. A summer holiday at Pointe au Baril would have been a welcome break after a busy academic year. It is possible that his close friend and fellow artist Lawren Harris, who had stayed at the Ojibway Hotel the previous summer, suggested a visit to Pointe au Baril.

MacDonald and his wife Joan may have stayed with Charles Barry Cleveland, a fellow member of the Toronto Arts and Letters Club. The Cleveland's cottage was on Orchard Island, across the channel from the Ojibway Hotel. Some photographs, generously shared by MacDonald's great-niece, may give a clue. The exact location of this spot on a rocky promontory is unknown. Any suggestions are welcome!!



J.E.H. MacDonald, Beatrice (Mrs. Lawren) Harris and Joan MacDonald

MacDonald's oil sketches of an azure blue sky over 'Sturgeon Bay', and the blue gray of a 'Windy Sky', so perfectly capture the dramatic Georgian Bay skies we know so well. That he did so on boards no bigger than 8 by 10 inches (21 by 26 cm), is all the more remarkable. Place names change over the years, so the Sturgeon Bay in the painting, may not be the one we know today. Do you recognise these views?



J.E.H. MacDonald, *Sturgeon Bay, near Pointe-au-Baril*, 1931, National Gallery of Canada



J.E.H. MacDonald, *Windy Sky, near Pointe-du-Baril*, 1931, National Gallery of Canada



MacDonald leans back in this photo, as do the pines in another oil sketch titled *Sturgeon Bay, Pointe au Baril*, lean above him. This small oil painting was given to Charles Barry Cleveland, his friend at Toronto Arts and Letters Club. Another location to be determined!!



The fourth Pointe au Baril painting is at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg, Ontario. Titled *Aurora, Georgian Bay, Pointe Au Baril, 1931*, it has a small pencil drawing to match.



Aurora, Georgian Bay, Pointe au Baril, 1931, The McMichael Canadian Art Collection

MacDonald once shared this singular piece of advice, '*All a painter needs to do is find a good place to sit*', and we'd like to think he found the perfect spot on the Ojibway porch to complete this painting. Note the height of the view, the position of the Big Dipper, the Northern Lights, and what might be the silhouette of the McLarty's island. What do you think?

These Pointe au Baril sketches were some of MacDonald's last. He suffered another stroke in his office the following year and died at the age of 59. Within weeks, his grieving fellow artists officially disbanded the Group of Seven.