

## NATIVE AMERICAN IN THE LAND OF THE SHOGUN

Ranald MacDonald and the Opening of Japan

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COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Fall 2005: Vol. 19, No. 3

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One of the most imposing landmarks in the city of Astoria is the Astoria Column, towering dramatically atop Coxcomb Hill, overlooking the Columbia River. A tourist pamphlet declares that the column, built in 1926, "commemorates the westward sweep of discovery and migration which brought settlement and western civilization to the Northwest Territory." This "westward sweep" nearly swept away all indigenous cultures in its path, but in 1961, at the foot of the tower, in what almost seems to have been an afterthought, the city added a small memorial to Chief Comcomly of the Chinooks. It is a raised black burial canoe, rendered in concrete, minus his remains. Directly below the hill and monument, on the corner of 15th and Exchange Streets, is a small park featuring a partial reconstruction of the original Fort Astoria, with part of a blockhouse and palisade visible. In one corner stands a granite stone memorial to Comcomly's descendant, Ranald MacDonald. Dedicated on May 21, 1988, with funding provided by the Portland Japanese Chamber of Commerce and generous individuals, the MacDonald monument has an inscription in English on one side and in Japanese on the other. The English engraving reads:

*Birthplace of Ranald MacDonald, 1824-1894. First teacher of English in Japan. The son of the Hudson's Bay Co. manager of Ft. George and Chinook 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 for over two hundred years. 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.*

The Japanese version on the reverse side is a loose, abbreviated translation of the English, but it adds the information that MacDonald was imprisoned while in Japan. Because of space limitations, neither the English nor Japanese inscription properly conveys the true extraordinariness of MacDonald's adventure. In 1848, for an ordinary North American to have gone to Japan would be like an individual in our time—with no connection to NASA—somehow deciding to go to the moon, and actually doing so. To most North Americans, Japan was an unknown, mysterious land; those who did know of it commonly believed foreigners caught on Japanese soil would be executed.

MacDonald had multiple motivations for his improbable adventure, but they included a desire to make his fortune by serving as an intermediary between the western world and Japan when it was finally opened to trade. He had been raised with romantic stories of shipwrecked Japanese in Hawaii and the Pacific Northwest. In Fort Vancouver, where he attended elementary school,

he just missed meeting three Japanese sailors brought there in 1834 after being shipwrecked in northwestern Washington.

That same year MacDonald was sent to the Red River settlement—today's Winnipeg—where he attended schools for the children of Hudson's Bay Company officers. Then, in 1839, he was sent farther east to St. Thomas, Canada, and apprenticed to a local businessman. In this largely European environment the mixed-race boy from the frontier did not fare well, "dropping out"—to his father's chagrin—and making his way to Sag Harbor, New York, where in 1842 he signed on as a sailor for a whaling ship. At the time, the seas near Japan were a popular hunting ground of the United States whaling fleet, and in Hawaii, the Pacific hub of the whaling industry, interest in Japan was at fever pitch. It was here, in Lahaina, in 1847, that MacDonald made a bargain with his sea captain, giving up his wages in return for a small boat and the chance of being left off the coast of Japan.

As the Japanese text on the monument suggests, MacDonald spent his entire ten months in Japan as a prisoner. Because he taught government interpreters English at a critical juncture in history, however, he indirectly helped Japan preserve her independence. Five years later, Commodore Perry and the United States Navy arrived and compelled Japan to end her isolation, and when other foreign powers arrived, many of MacDonald's pupils were able to use their newly acquired language skills to great effect.

Had MacDonald immediately returned to North America in 1849, when he was finally deported, he might have become famous. Ever the adventurer, however, he continued to travel, then sought his fortune in the Australian Gold Rush, and did not return to North America until 1853, at which time Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan had captured the attention of the press. MacDonald remained on the western frontier for the rest of his life, and the memoir of his adventures was not published until 1923, long after his death.

Bruce Berney, head of the Astoria City Library until 1997, initiated the project to build the monument. He had once taught English in Japan and so had become interested in things Japanese. Like most Americans, however, he had never heard of MacDonald, whose story had been largely forgotten. Around 1970, while weeding out old books in the library, Berney stumbled across the 1923 Eastern Washington State Historical Society's edition of MacDonald's book (the posthumously published *Ranald MacDonald*, which contains the narrative of his Japanese adventure).

Berney found MacDonald's story almost too amazing to believe. By coincidence, they both shared the same birthday—February 3—and with this connection in mind, Berney put on a "birthday party" for MacDonald in 1974. He worked up for the occasion a four-page, printed program, outlining MacDonald's life story. Copies were later sent around the country, and, as it happened, one was read by Torao Tomita, then a Japanese Fulbright student studying American history at Yale University. Tomita knew of and was already interested in MacDonald, and he therefore traveled to Astoria to meet Berney. Tomita was given an original copy of the 1923 book, which he later translated into Japanese, thus rekindling interest in MacDonald in Japan. As Berney recently recalled,

*[A]fter the "birthday party" I realized not only that MacDonald's story was authentic but that people really were interested in him. As library director in Astoria I also thought the book helped show that literature is important to the community. There were many sailors then coming to Astoria from all over, walking around town without knowing anything about Ranald MacDonald*

*and the fact that he was born here. So I decided there ought to be a monument to him, both in English and in Japanese.*

With help from the Astoria Chamber of Commerce, individuals, and especially Mas Tomita, local Japanese head of the Epson Company in Portland, money was raised for a stone memorial. A "Friends of MacDonald" Society was organized as a committee within the Clatsop County Historical Society. A dedication ceremony was carried out under the latter's auspices and attended by local notables, representatives of the British and Japanese consulates, descendants of Comcomly, and relatives of MacDonald from Washington and Montana. Torao Tomita was one of the key speakers.

Astoria derives its name from John Jacob Astor, the famous German-born New York merchant. Immortalized in Washington Irving's 1836 classic, *Astoria*, Astor had a remarkably global vision at the dawn of the 19th century. He knew some people were making fortunes in the fur trade, especially the shareholders of the London-based Hudson's Bay Company, as well as the North West Company, based in Montreal. Both companies had posts distributed throughout the northeast and central American wilderness; their furs were transported across an elaborate system of rivers, lakes, and portages, then shipped across the Atlantic to Europe, from whence they could be sent on to China. The "North Westers" (or Nor' Westers) did a particularly roaring business, and when the company partners showed up in New York they created quite an impression. Irving wrote how they had about them "a gorgeous prodigality, such as was often to be noticed in former times in southern planters and West India Creoles, when flush with the profits of their plantations."

When trade became possible between the newly independent United States and British Canada, Astor entered the fur business and soon made a considerable profit. Nonetheless, he foresaw how a trading concern with an outpost on the Columbia River (with other posts inland) would accrue enormous advantages over his rivals. His was truly a bold idea, given the then small size of the United States and its distance from the Pacific.

To Astor's way of thinking, such an outpost could ship furs directly to Canton, China, and even supply Russian forts in Alaska. Such an American outpost would also help to fend off rival trading groups in the area and might help establish a United States claim to the region, upon which the British, Russians, and Spanish had also set their sights. After receiving President Thomas Jefferson's encouragement, Astor formed the Pacific Fur Company in 1810 and sent two expeditions to the mouth of the Columbia, one by land and one by sea in the *Tonquin*. After visiting the Hawaiian Islands, the *Tonquin* (like many ships in the fur trade) picked up a group of Hawaiian natives as crew and helpers and headed for the Columbia. The ship cleared the bar at the end of March 1811, losing several men in the process. Shortly thereafter, the survivors built an outpost on the south side of the Columbia and named it Astoria, after their venture's founder.

Like earlier visitors, the "Astorians"—made up of Scots, Iroquois, French Canadians, and Hawaiians—immediately became indebted to Comcomly and the Chinooks. Irving referred to Comcomly in his book as "a shrewd old savage, with but one eye," yet noted that he received the Astorians with great hospitality. Only days after meeting them, Comcomly saved several lives after a boat carrying their de facto leader, Duncan McDougall, capsized in the roiling waters of the Columbia. The Chinooks went on to help the Americans, teaching them to navigate the Columbia and protecting and provisioning them as they struggled to set up their trading operation. The natives also revealed to the Astorians a remarkable link they had to Asia. As

Gabriel Franchère noted in his journal entry for August 11, they brought along a man who—apparently having worked previously for a trading ship—"appeared to be endowed with a good deal of intelligence and knew several English words. He told us that he had been at the Russian trading post at Chitka [Sitka, Alaska], on the California coast, in the Sandwich Islands, and in China."

Comcomly worked particularly hard to cement his relationship with the Astorians. He had several wives, as was the custom among the Chinook aristocracy, and many children, including several attractive daughters. After rescuing the hapless McDougall, who could not swim, from the Columbia, Comcomly took the man and his companions to his village to dry out. As Irving described it, "His wives and daughters endeavored by all the soothing and endearing arts of women, to find favor in their eyes. Some even painted their bodies with red clay and anointed themselves with fish oil to give additional luster to their charms."

The strategy worked. McDougall proposed marriage to one of Comcomly's daughters, and on July 20, 1813, he was united with her in a lavish ceremony. Comcomly sailed to Astoria from his village, a squadron of canoes carrying his royal family. Irving, adding his trademark seriocomic style to the stories and journals of others, observed that the, "[w]orthy sachem landed in princely state, arranged in a bright blue blanket and red breech clout, with an extra quantity of paint and feathers, attended by a train of half-naked warriors and nobles. A horse was in waiting to receive the princess, who was mounted behind one of the clerks, and thus conveyed, coy but compliant, to the fortress. Here she was received with devout though decent joy by her expectant bridegroom...." From that time forward Comcomly was a daily visitor at the fort and was admitted into the most intimate councils of his son-in-law.

The marriage was regarded as a strategic alliance by the Chinooks and whites alike; among the Astorians, Comcomly was thereafter referred to as a "king" and his children as "princes" or "princesses." (Later, the British would commonly refer to his oldest son and daughter as the "Prince and Princess of Wales.") But Astoria itself proved to be temporarily doomed. The problem was neither the elements, the Indians, nor failure of Astor's planning. Indeed, John Jacob Astor's vision steadily turned into reality, with trade initiated between the mouth of the Columbia and Canton via the Hawaiian Islands and the Russian outpost of Sitka. Astoria's real problem proved to be global politics.

The year 1812 found the young United States and Britain again embroiled in war. Although the fighting took place far from Astoria (and for the British, at least, was really an extension of its wars with Napoleonic France), the area was not unaffected. In October 1813 members of a rival trading company, the North West Company, appeared in Astoria. McDougall—knowing that the men hailed from Canada, which was British-controlled, and fearing British warships would arrive to conquer them at any moment—decided to sell the brand new fort to the Nor' Westers. The fact that he had formerly been a member of that company—and soon rejoined them after selling the fort—led many subsequent writers to question his loyalty to the United States. Like many of the original "Astorians," however, McDougall was not really an American but a Scotsman from British Canada, only chosen by Astor for his prior experience in the fur trade.

The North West Company, formed in 1787, was based in Montreal, which had itself only been wrested from the French by the British in 1763. Like the United States, Canada in 1812 was a fraction of its present size, existing mostly as a strip of land around the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes; the region west of the Rockies was still a vast, dimly understood frontier. But as one of the great fur empires of its day, the North West Company rapidly expanded westward. Its

partners, or major shareholders, and officers were mainly of Scottish descent. They formed a sort of commercial aristocracy among themselves, many living and working much of the year in the wilderness; their intimate familiarity with the wilderness contributed greatly to the company's success.

These men had found it nearly impossible to survive without Indian wives, women who knew how to live off the land and could act as friendly intermediaries with local tribes. The result was intermarriage and the birth of a community of mixed-blood children. This was particularly true of the company's French Catholic employees—the trappers and the tireless canoe paddlers and workers known as voyageurs. Far more than Protestant whites, they were, as Irving put it, "prone to intermarry and domesticate themselves among the Indians." They became so acclimated to life in the wilderness that their culture blurred with that of the Indians. Their dress became a mixture of European and Indian costumes, their language also became "of the same piebald character, being a French patois, embroidered with Indian and English words and phrases." At a typical gathering of Nor' Westers in Montreal, when the Scotsmen sang and reveled, "their merriment was echoed and prolonged by a mongrel legion of retainers, Canadian voyageurs, half breeds, Indian hunters, and vagabond hangers-on, who feasted sumptuously without on the crumbs that fell from their table, and made the welkin ring with old French ditties, mingled with Indian yelps and yellings."

A few members of the North West Company had visited Astoria right after the Americans built the fort. David Thompson, an official geographer for the company, made it to the area in 1811 and was welcomed by Duncan McDougall as well as Comcomly and the Chinooks. On July 14 Thompson took his men out to the coast to see the Pacific Ocean for the first time. Although personally thrilled, Thompson would write, "[M]y Men seemed disappointed; they had been accustomed to the boundless horizons of the great Lakes of Canada, and their high rolling waves; from the Ocean they expected a more boundless view, a something beyond the power of their senses which they could not describe; and my informing them, that directly opposite to us, at the distance of five thousand miles was the Empire of Japan added nothing to their ideas, but a Map would."

In November 1813 Astoria's transition to British control became complete when a British warship arrived to take formal possession of the little settlement. Comcomly had difficulty understanding how the "Bostons" could give up without a fight to "King George's men," and reportedly remarked of his son-in-law that his daughter had made a mistake, "instead of getting a great warrior for a husband, had married herself to a squaw." But like many of the original Astorians who merely changed employers, Comcomly adapted quickly. One witness described him a few months later as wearing "a red coat, New Brunswick Regiment 104th, a Chinese hat, white shirt, cravat, trousers, cotton stockings, and a fine pair of shoes." British-controlled Astoria was renamed "Fort George," and for a while the settlement prospered, as did Comcomly and his tribe. Still, like Astor's Pacific Fur Company, the North West Company's reign was short. Far to the north and east, the North West Company's arch rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, was steadily expanding its sphere of influence.

In Canada today, the Hudson's Bay Company is best known for its chain of department stores called "The Bay," yet it is also arguably the world's oldest corporation. Chartered in 1670 by the British Crown as "The Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay," its mission was mainly to trade for furs, yet it was also supposed to search for a Northwest Passage that would lead to the riches of the Far East. Functioning much like an independent, corporate

state, the HBC retained the power to deploy its own armies and navies, make laws, and mint coin. Like Britain's East India Company on the other side of the world, the HBC was also granted monopoly trading rights, in this case to the entire Hudson Bay drainage basin, a vague place called "Rupert's Land," so huge that almost no one had any idea of its true size. For over a century the HBC largely operated around the frigid Hudson Bay, trading blankets and simple manufactures for furs trapped by Indians, and shipping them back to Great Britain. Initially, its officers were mainly English or Scottish, while young men taken from the impoverished Orkney Islands in the North Atlantic formed the main labor force.

Unlike the North West Company, the HBC long required its employees to submit to an impossible life of bachelorhood, for no white women were brought to the Hudson Bay area, and marriage with Indians was forbidden. But in the wilderness, nature had its way. Like the Nor' Westers, more and more HBC men developed liaisons with Indian women. Inevitably, as scholar Silvia Van Kirk would come to document in her book, *Many Tender Ties; Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870*, and despite HBC policy, these liaisons often developed into more permanent marriages that were described as "au façon du pays" (in the custom of the country).

As the HBC slowly expanded south and west, it began to collide with the newer North West Company, expanding north and west. The two organizations remained rivals until 1821 when the North West Company was pushed to merge into the HBC. The takeover in effect gave the latter a virtual empire of over 3 million square miles of territory, for Britain gave the HBC not only monopoly trading rights in "Rupert's Land" but sole British trading rights in today's Pacific Northwest, then referred to as the "Oregon country." In 1818 a Treaty of Joint Occupation had been signed with the United States over this vast wilderness, including the Columbia River basin, between Russian Alaska and Spanish California. Since almost no Americans were then in the region, the HBC wound up with de facto jurisdiction over an area that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

George Simpson was sent out from London in 1820 to eventually oversee the HBC's reorganization in North America. A small but physically tough man, Governor Simpson would so dominate North American HBC operations for the next few decades that he would be referred to as a little "emperor," an allusion to Napoleon, whom he greatly admired. Simpson would take the company to its greatest heights of glory and ultimately diversify it beyond furs, but one of his first tasks was to understand and consolidate the assets of the newly enlarged enterprise. In 1821 he sent a promising young clerk named Archibald MacDonald all the way to the Columbia River and Fort George, the former Astoria, to inventory the company's new assets.

Like many HBC officials, MacDonald was a Scot. Descended from the famous Donald Clan and a long line of Highland warriors, he was a man of great talent, and was well-educated for his day, with training in mathematics, Latin, English and Gaelic literature, medicine, and other sciences. Jean Murray Cole, a 20th-century biographer and descendant, notes that he "possessed a *joie de vivre*, a gift for friendship and loyalty...a devotion to family and a delight in children and young people that charmed everyone in his circle throughout his life." According to the *Montreal Gazette*, which ran his obituary in 1853, "His courage, skill, and physical power, as a young man, were extraordinary, and to these were united mental qualifications of no mean order." He had joined the HBC in 1820.

From the beginning, Archibald MacDonald was on an elite track. He was a "gentleman" who would become an officer and devote his life to the HBC, presiding over large numbers of voyageurs, trappers, and laborers. Beneath the governorship was a hierarchy of three grades of

officers—chief factors, chief traders, and clerks—and with diligence and application one could rise through the ranks. As one of Archibald's sons later described it, "The advancement in the Hudson's Bay Company was by promotion, much like the advancement in the army. A clerk would advance to Chief Trader usually after about five to ten years of service and would then be eligible for Chief Factor, if he proved the right mettle, after the expiration of ten years more." The company was like a military organization in that its officers could expect to be rotated in and out of a variety of assignments and posts.

Around the time Astoria fell under British control, company policy on marriage to local Indians relaxed, at least in the Pacific Northwest. George Simpson had a reputation as a scoundrel when it came to Indian women, so much so that he has been referred to as "'the father of the fur trade'...with a nudge and a knowing wink." But even he realized that the highly organized Indian societies at the mouth of the Columbia were different from those inland, writing: "[C]onnubial alliances are the best security we can have of the goodwill of the Natives, I have therefore recommended the Gentlemen to form connections with the principal Families immediately on their arrival, which is no difficult matter as the offer of their Wives & Daughters is the first token of their Friendship & Hospitality."

In 1824, when Simpson himself later visited the former Astoria, newly named Fort George, he found himself under great pressure to marry another of Comcomly's daughters. "I...have a difficult card to play," he wrote, "being equally desirous to keep clear of the Daughter and continue on good terms with the Mother and by management I hope to succeed in both altho her Ladyship is most pressing & persevering tempting me with fresh offers and inducements every succeeding Day."

Archibald MacDonald must have made Simpson very happy, for he had already married another daughter of Comcomly's, variously known as Princess Raven (after her Chinookan name of Koale'xoa) or "Princess Sunday." He was at least the third white man to marry one of the chief's daughters. It is not known if Archibald married for love or simply because of his superior's recommendation and the need for a housekeeper. He was 33 years old, in his physical prime, living in a country where the only white woman ever previously seen had been an English bar girl brought out for a brief stay in 1814. A blue-blooded Chinook princess was thus considered an attractive match, despite the vast cultural differences between the two individuals. Many whites criticized the loose morals of single Chinook women but thought highly of them as wives. One usually acerbic Astorian wrote, "Many of these women, who have followed a depraved course of life before marriage, become excellent and faithful wives afterwards."

Archibald apparently never discussed his first marriage with his son. In the latter's posthumously published narrative, Ranald MacDonald relates that he only heard about the union from a ship captain at a much later date. Leading up to the wedding site, he was told—covering "about three hundred yards—was a path of golden sheen, of richest furs, viz. of prime beaver, otter (sea and land), nothing less!...Along this golden path way, as a guard of honor, were three hundred of the slaves, so-called, of the King."

Ranald had difficulty believing the story when he first heard it. Jokingly, he once remarked, "That could not be my Father for the HBC had too great veneration of a Beaver skin to make a carpet of it, [therefore I thought it] must be Mr. McDougall of the Astor Company, [but the captain] said, no, it was MacDonald." About six months after Archibald's marriage, on or about February 3, 1824, Ranald was born. His mother died shortly after the birth and almost nothing is known about her. Ranald was entrusted to the care of her Chinook sister, Carcumcum, who lived

in a lodge next to the fort. He became, according to his own account, "the favorite, the 'Toll, Toll' [Chinook for 'the Boy! the Boy!'] of Gran'pa."

That same year, under Simpson's directions, the company's Columbia River operations were relocated some 80 miles upriver, on the north bank. More convenient for fur collection, this site became Fort Vancouver. About a year later, during his travels, Archibald MacDonald met and fell in love with Jane Klyne, daughter of Michael Klyne, who worked for the HBC in the Rocky Mountains. Ranald MacDonald's posthumously published autobiography refers to her as a 16- or 17-year-old "German Swiss" woman, but subsequent research has clearly shown that his stepmother was a French and Métis (mixed-blood) woman.

Archibald's union with Jane Klyne proved to be long and happy, producing a total of 13 children. Jane would grow into her role as wife of a powerful HBC officer, later making a remarkable adaptation to life in a white, civilized world. Glowing reports of her exist in the accounts of early visitors to the West and reveal hints of her true ancestry. Cushing Eells, an American missionary who visited the MacDonalds in 1838 at Fort Colvile, wrote that "[MacDonald's] wife was a jewel. A native of the country, she possessed rare excellence. The deportment of her numerous children was living testimony to her maternal efficiency." Mary Walker, wife of another missionary, recorded in 1839: "Mr. Mdonald is a Scotch Presbyterian, very kind & hospitable has a pleasant wife who is nearly white & speaks good English. Their children appear as well as I think as any I ever saw in N.E. Their mother attends to their instructions having been herself educated by her husband."

Jane Klyne took in Ranald and raised him as her own child. In his posthumously published narrative he implies that not until much later in life did he know that his real mother was Comcomly's daughter, a Chinook princess, or even that he was part Chinook. This is highly unlikely, but MacDonald (or his editor) nonetheless wrote that after learning the real history of his birth, "the disillusionment pained me beyond expression." Exactly what Ranald MacDonald knew about his real ancestry, and when he knew it, is one of the central mysteries all researchers of his story confront, as these facts probably had an influence on his later decision to go to Japan.

Questions about MacDonald's knowledge of his true ancestry aside, the fusion of Chinook and Scottish blood that he represented may have helped him in specific ways during his later adventure to Japan. His features did have a slight Asian cast. While this may not have aided his initial landing in Japan—as even returning Japanese castaways were sometimes treated harshly—to his guards, at least, MacDonald may have seemed less threatening than other foreigners. In support of this theory, one of his cousins wrote in 1916, amusingly, that "Ranald's mother, was the daughter of an Indian chief on the Pacific Coast, hence, his complexion was that of Japanese only unusually larger, which I think [was] the true salvation of all the prisoners. No doubt the Japanese Governor, who employed Ranald, possibly thought that Ranald was of his tribe, etc."

Second, while hereditary aspects of personality may be argued, in the end MacDonald was a man of superior intelligence, possessing a phenomenal memory and an absolutely fearless spirit. And like both his father and Chinook grandfather, MacDonald genuinely enjoyed people. In his surviving letters, he displays a wonderful sense of humor. From the letters of those who knew him, and even from Japanese government records, it is clear that he had a rare ability to attract people from broad walks of life, putting them at ease and endearing himself to them.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the context of his adventure, Ranald MacDonald inherited an especially healthy constitution, with enormous upper body strength. He grew to be five feet eight, or nine, inches tall, and at 39 he was described as "very active" and weighing "over 225lb." All indications are that for most of his life he was never ill. He lived to be 70, which for his lifestyle and era was remarkable, but there was precedent for this among his ancestors. Although his Chinook mother had died in childbirth, his grandfather Comcomly lived into his mid sixties, as did his father. His paternal grandparents lived to be 84 and 88 years old. From his father young Ranald had inherited a natural immunity to European diseases, but just in case, he was vaccinated against small pox twice—at a time when inoculations were still a very new medical procedure.

The Chinooks proper had once been the most powerful and influential tribe in the history of the Pacific Northwest. Their language built the foundation for a 19th-century type of "Esperanto"—a simplified trading jargon called "Chinook"—used by Indians and whites up and down the Pacific Northwest coast. The tribe's influence is reflected today in place names in Oregon and Washington and in Chinook helicopters, Chinook salmon, and Chinook winds. A Chinook Indian tribe does survive—headquartered in the little town of Chinook, Washington, set along the banks of the Columbia—but it is still struggling for formal legal recognition.

The Chinooks did not decline in power because of war or conflict. When the Hudson's Bay Company moved its main base of operations from Fort George to Fort Vancouver in 1825, the Chinooks could no longer play their time-honored role of intermediaries between the whites and other tribes upriver. And the Chinook social system had become corrupted by interaction with whites, so that even Comcomly's strict prohibitions against alcohol collapsed. Finally, like indigenous peoples around the world—like the Ainu in Japan and the Polynesians in the Pacific—the Chinooks were nearly destroyed by European germs. In 1806 Lewis and Clark had noticed the debilitating effects of smallpox, but that was only the beginning. Over the years, the Chinooks and other coastal tribes saw their numbers plummet through measles, malaria, and other unknown diseases.

The missionary, Reverend Samuel Parker, who visited the area in 1835, found relatively few Indians left to convert:

*Since the year 1829 probably seven-eighths, if not...nine-tenths, have been swept away by disease, principally by fever and ague.... In the burning stage of the fever they plunged themselves into the river, and continued in the water until the heat was allayed, and rarely survived the cold stage which followed. So many and so sudden were the deaths which occurred, that the shores were strewn with the unburied dead. Whole and large villages were depopulated; and some entire tribes have disappeared, the few remaining persons, if there were any, united themselves with other tribes. This great mortality extended not only from the vicinity of the Cascades to the shores of the Pacific, but far north and south.*

Ten years later, in 1845, another missionary—Reverend George Gary—would note in his diary that the Chinooks and Clatsops were "passing away like the dew; there are but four children under one year old in both tribes."

If MacDonald's lineage aided him in his adventure to Japan, the geographical location of his birth helped him even more. He gained an easy familiarity with languages, or at least a gift for communicating, through being born into an extremely polyglot environment. HBC employees around the Columbia River spoke a myriad of tongues, including French, Cree, Hawaiian, and Iroquois. Yet the area had been a complex linguistic milieu long before the whites arrived, as the

Chinooks were used to communicating with other tribes who spoke different languages. After the arrival of the whites, Comcomly learned quite a bit of English, and several of his children became fluent. In 1839 British naval captain Edward Belcher (who would also visit Japan, just before MacDonald) stopped at the mouth of the Columbia and commented on the Chinooks: "As a nation, the first thing that struck us was their facility in picking up words, even to short sentences, and repeating the whole tolerably correctly."

After the young MacDonald began living with his father and step-mother, he was still exposed to a wide variety of languages. His father's native tongue was Gaelic, while that of his stepmother was presumably French, mixed with some native dialect. Given that one of MacDonald's stated reasons for going to Japan was to become an interpreter, it is worth noting his own father's acute awareness of the importance of interpreters. In an August 8, 1842, letter to an HBC superior, Archibald noted how hostile Indians had recently rained arrows on him and his men mainly because they had lacked interpreters after a misunderstanding had arisen. Condemning the company's recent cutbacks in interpreters, he warned headquarters of the long-term consequences, stating flatly: "Interpreters are a necessary evil."

Most important, in terms of MacDonald's adventure to Japan, is the fact that, for their time, people living at the mouth of the Columbia River had a uniquely global perspective and an orientation to Asia. The Astorians traded with China and dreamed of Japan. The Hudson's Bay Company could not sell furs directly to China (then under the jurisdiction of the East India Company) but it did trade with the Russians in Alaska, the Spanish in California, and the independent kingdom of Hawaii. And in an age in which most people spent their entire lives within a radius of 100 miles, HBC officers such as MacDonald's father were true globetrotters, regularly traveling vast distances across the North American continent, and back and forth to Europe. Some, such as Governor George Simpson, were almost constantly on the move, even encircling the globe. To these company men Japan, because of its harsh laws, might not have been an immediate place to trade, but it was an object of intense interest. As MacDonald would write in his posthumously published narrative, "Japan was our next neighbor across the way—only the placid sea, the Pacific, between us."

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*Fluent in spoken and written Japanese, Frederik L. Schodt is a San Francisco-based author, interpreter, and translator who has written extensively on Japanese culture and Japan-United States relations. This article is based on an excerpt from Schodt's recent book, Native American in the Land of the Shogun: Ranald MacDonald and the Opening of Japan (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), with permission of the publisher.*