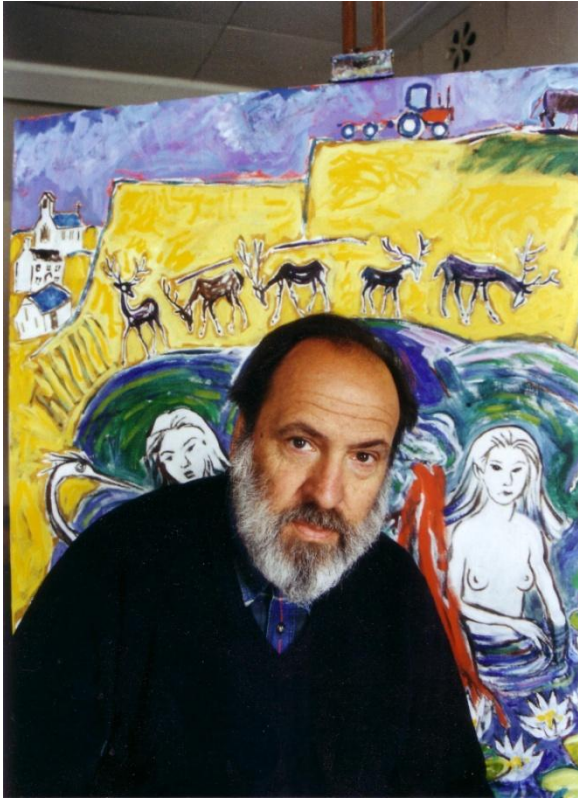


## **Robert Macdonald**

### **Print Making, Painting and the Unconscious**

**based on a talk to CASW, February 2014**



When people ask me how I got into painting I usually say ‘by the back door’. When I left school in rural New Zealand at the end of 1952 there was no possibility of going to art college, and I joined a small country newspaper as a cadet reporter. I always had a strange conviction that one day I would become a professional artist, but it seemed an impossible dream. Artistic interests were not encouraged at my high school deep in the dairy-farming and rugby-playing Waikato province. I knew of no-one in those days who pursued art as a career. Almost the only original art I saw were the fantastic carvings which decorated whare whakairo – Maori meeting houses. I had gone to New Zealand with my family from Britain at the age of 10 and a number of my earlier years were spent as a war-time evacuee in Somerset, where I was also fascinated by the rustic carvings I saw in country churches.

There was art in my family background, however. My father was a veterinary surgeon, but like a number of his six siblings, he was an amateur painter. His father, professor of physiology at Liverpool University, had collected pictures. Sadly, Grandpa Mac did not have very adventurous taste. He was acquainted with Augustus John at Liverpool University but never bought any of John’s pictures. Rather he acquired great numbers of coloured Victorian steel engravings which often featured battles and storms at sea. What Granny Mac, my lovely Gaelic-speaking granny from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, thought of these pictures is hard to tell. She came from an island where the intensely puritan Wee Frees regarded art of any kind with deep suspicion and turned pictures face to the wall on the Sabbath. And Granny Mac’s father, a crofter/fisherman, was drowned in stormy seas one

Christmas Eve, bringing back his fishing-boat from Stornoway to his home on the Eye Peninsula, possibly with more than a dram or two of whisky under his belt.

Although my Macdonald relatives painted they never considered art a proper full-time pursuit. They were serious and dedicated professional people, doctors and engineers. Scientific rationalism would seem to underpin the family view of the world, but it was at odds with other aspects of family history. Like many of her fellow islanders Granny Mac was a firm believer in second sight and Grandpa Mac himself was a deep-dyed romantic as evidenced by his artistic taste. He was also, like his Hebridean father-in-law, a heavy drinker. In my family the other side of the coin to scientific rationalism was alcoholism, and it took hold of my father in my teenage years too.

Soon after taking up my first job in New Zealand, I began to attend weekend art classes in the city of Hamilton. They were run by a local man, Geoffrey Fairburn, brother of the famous poet A.R.D. Fairburn. For New Zealand in those days he had advanced tastes and encouraged me to look at the Impressionists and Post Impressionists. He was president of the Waikato Society of Arts which ran the only art gallery in the Waikato – a small tin hut overlooking the Waikato River. The gallery was staffed by volunteers and I was soon involved helping to organise exhibitions. I moved to Hamilton and became a committee member of the arts society and art critic for the local newspaper, writing under the pen-name of Corduroy.

I say I entered the world of art by the back-door for my first exhibited paintings were really not paintings at all, but extended doodles. There was a very good bookshop in Hamilton, Paul's Book Arcade, which became my university. I devoured in my lunch-time all the books on Modernism which arrived from overseas. I read about Paul Klee and his advice to artists to 'take a line for a walk'. When I went home in the evening I did just that. I took Indian ink and a pen and drew images at random, putting down on paper whatever imaginative impulses guided my hand.

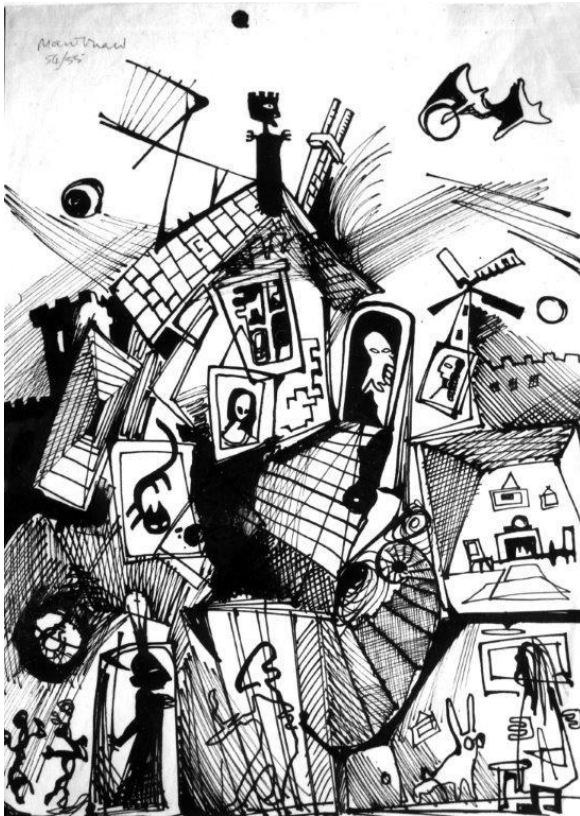
I can see now that I had embarked on adulthood with what might be described as an over-loaded unconscious, and stumbled unknowingly on a way of downloading it. Art was first and foremost for me a form of psychotherapy.

Before emigrating to New Zealand my earlier years in England were dominated by the Second World War. Early in the war my father turned his back on veterinary medicine and took up war-work as a radar technician in a heavily militarised area of the South Coast. I set off for school each day with my gasmask over my shoulder, and when there were air-raid alarms, as there often were, we children crouched under our desks until the All Clear sounded. At night when the warnings went off we were shepherded downstairs to lie with our blankets under the kitchen table. My elder brother claimed he could identify the German aircraft flying overhead by their engine noises, and we would listen goggle-eyed in the dark to the uneven sound of Junkers bombers droning by.

The Air Raid sirens failed to sound early one morning when a covey of bombers dived in over the cliffs and dropped a stick of bombs on our street. Our neighbours' houses collapsed in piles of rubble and roof timbers. Ours at the end of the street remained standing, though the walls were cracked and the doors, windows and ceilings blown in. My first memory is of my father emerging through a cloud of plaster dust to carry me downstairs over a sea of broken glass.

My father remained on the South Coast after the bombing but the rest of us were scattered. My sister went to live with relatives in Scotland. I and my two brothers were evacuated to Somerset and billeted in different homes while my mother lived elsewhere and worked in a camouflage factory for a while. Before the war ended, when the aerial threat to Britain faded away, my father gained release from his radar work. Seeking veterinary work again, he was offered a job in the far north of New Zealand. He was one of two vets sent to work on the Northland Peninsula where no vets had ever worked before. The New Zealand Government was making a bid to build up the agricultural infrastructure of the country before thousands of servicemen returned from overseas.

In the bright sunshine of northern New Zealand, with plentiful ice-creams and friendly neighbours, we children turned our backs on memories of the war. I can see now we were emotionally numbed by our upheavals. My father's growing alcoholism was another good reason to shut down our feelings.



It was art which provided me with my escape from this emotional cul-de-sac, and specifically it was Paul Klee's advice. When in Hamilton I went home in the evening, sat in front of a drawing-board and took my pen for a walk, all-sorts of imagery began tumbling out. Years later, in middle life, when I began looking at these ink drawings again with a greater store of insight, I saw how graphically they exposed aspects of my life I had turned my back on. Take my first image – **Shattered House** - with rooms exposed and with ghostly and weird figures giving a sense of the sinister. Aerial shapes fly overhead while through the centre of the picture is a staircase winding downwards.

I had no idea at the time what impelled me to create such a picture, but many years later I recognised how symbolically it explores

feelings arising from the bombing of our home. Here are the shattered rooms and the staircase down which I was carried. And my second image - **House of Cards** - contains many of the same feelings. Interestingly both pictures reveal that early fascination I had with Maori art and carving.

An urge to explore troubled feelings became a constant in my picture-making over the next thirty





years, the urge sometimes disguised under a layer of jokeyness and satire. In 1958 I made my way back to Britain. Living on savings from my work as a reporter, I studied for a period at the London Central School of Art. I felt most at home among the inks and presses of the etching room, where I created an etching - **Mounted Knight** - which gained rather premature success.

It was indebted to Picasso's *Guernica* and his screaming horses, but I'd been to see Jackson Pollock's first London exhibition. Influenced by him, I flung liquid sugarlift on my plate to create Pollock-like effects. I may have been the first British printmaker to do this and my etching was sent to America in a travelling exhibition of twenty-five British printmakers.



My savings exhausted, I returned to journalism and worked throughout the 1960s in Fleet Street, painting in my spare time. **Fleet Street** was one of my last oil-paintings. The fumes of turps and oils in small bedsits made me ill and I began experimenting with acrylics, employing the hard-edge techniques on cotton-duck canvas favoured by Britain's celebrity abstractionists but in an unfashionable figurative way.

I explored the medium by playing symbolically with images from Victorian paintings of Maori chiefs - **Te Hau-Takiri Wharepapa** - and also in a jokey way touched on the theme of war as in **Into Battle**.





It was paintings like these which gained me a place as a mature student in the Painting School of the postgraduate Royal College of Art in 1976, though I had no first degree.

Before the RCA I had embarked on a period of psychotherapy and used time at the college to confront war-time images more seriously as in **Falling Airman**.



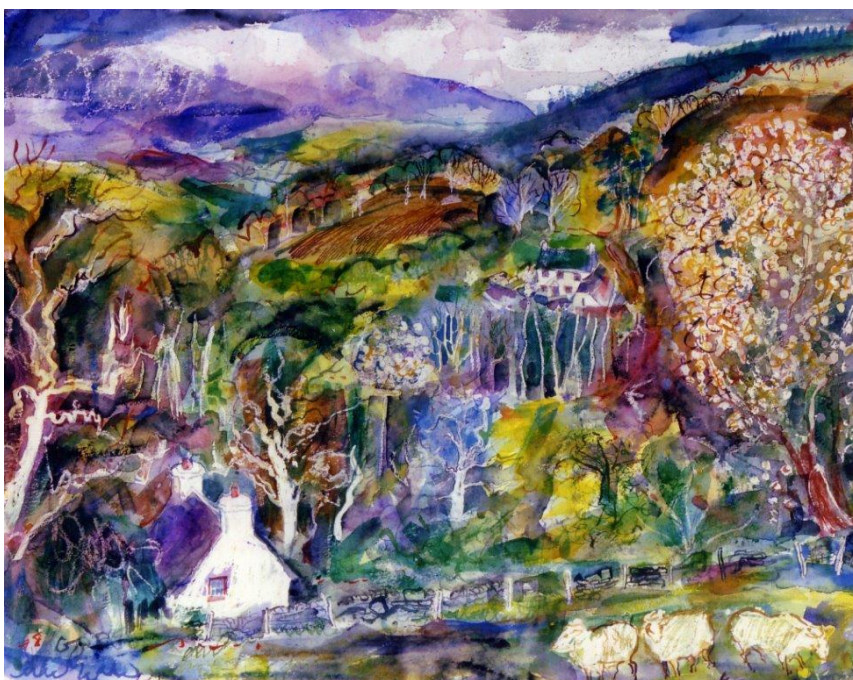
I was fascinated, too, by Jungian theory and returned to the Central School's etching department after leaving the RCA, to produce a series of prints giving free reign to stream-of-consciousness explorations.



**Last, last Voyage to the Falkland Isles** gained its title a month or so before the Falklands War broke out, though it had no rational connection with that conflict.

I returned to New Zealand in the 1980s and wrote a book about Maori political struggles, *The Fifth Wind*, published in 1989 by Bloomsbury and illustrated with linocuts. Much of the book was written in Wales, in a cottage in the Brecon Beacons discovered by my Welsh-born wife Annie. After publication I returned to make the Usk Valley my home. Wales was in a way a rediscovery of my rural roots but also marked a major change in my approach to art. In Wales I turned away from the inner preoccupations which dominated my early work, and began to celebrate the countryside around me.

**Parcside** shows my cottage below Mynydd Illtyd.





An artistic exploration of local legends has pushed aside my stream-of-consciousness preoccupations too. **Llyn-y-Fan Fach** is one of many paintings and prints inspired by this Welsh version of the Orpheus myth.

Wales has not banished the war entirely from my artistic consciousness. I'm now a director of the Swansea Print Workshop and last year it was decided to celebrate the Dylan Thomas centenary with a portfolio of members' prints. The poet's sense of 'belonging', to Swansea and to Wales, was to be the theme. This gave me problems. Naturally, I have a fractured sense of belonging. How could I relate to Dylan Thomas's? It was only when I read his prose work for radio, 'Return Journey', that I felt an intense connection. He writes of returning to Swansea after the Blitz and witnessing the destruction of his old haunts. Swansea, it is said, suffered forty bombing raids. 'Return Journey' brought pictures to my mind of the poet surrounded by the sort of destruction I saw as a boy of seven. And I have included in my etchings the aircraft; threatening presences throughout my formative years as in **Dylan Surveys Swansea**.



### **Note about the contributor**

Robert Macdonald lives near Brecon in south Wales, but spent much of his early life in New Zealand where his family emigrated when he was a child. He trained originally as a journalist, but interrupted his career on a number of occasions to study painting before going to the Royal College of Art at the age of 40. After graduating he started teaching art in schools in London and Kent (Tracy Emin was one of his students) as well as starting to paint seriously.

He has lived in Wales since the late 80s and has become known for his watercolour landscapes of the area around Brecon. He is also an accompanied printmaker, recently illustrating a limited edition of John Donne's poetry for the Old Stile Press at Llandogo.

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