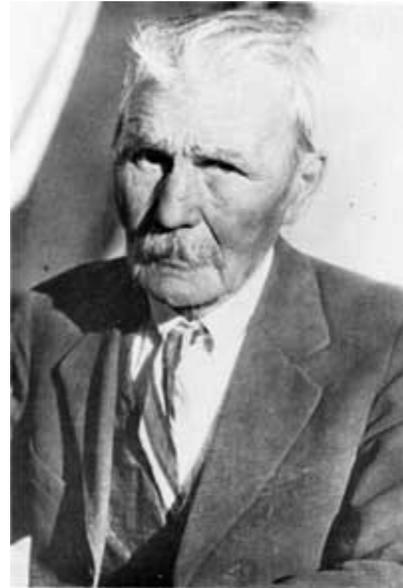


## **Duncan McDonald (1849-1937)** **The Sage of the Flathead**

McDonald was born on 1849 at Fort Connah in Mission Valley (Montana), the last HBC post established within the present boundaries of the United States. His father, Angus McDonald, was born in Ross Shire in 1816, joined the HBC in 1838, and was posted to Fort Colville in Oregon Territory. Fluent in Gaelic, French, and several Native languages, Angus soon became well respected in both Indian and white circles. Territorial governor Isaac I. Stevens thought very highly of him. Duncan's mother was full-blood, Salish-speaking Flathead. Thus, Duncan McDonald grew to maturity with one foot in both the Indian and white worlds.



Duncan McDonald

After retiring from the HBC McDonald senior ran large herds of cattle on the plains of Montana. He died in 1889, the year Montana became a state. McDonald had hired tutors to teach Duncan to read and write, talents that allowed his son to become the most prominent mixed-blood spokesman in Montana's history.

Duncan gained his initial audience shortly after the Nez Perce war of 1877. Both McDonalds believed that the Native version of the conflict deserved publicity. They contacted a local newspaper, the Deer Lodge *New North-West*, and the paper paid Duncan's expenses to travel to Canada to interview White Bird, to whom he was related, plus a number of other Nez Perce leaders. Together with his father, Duncan reworked his extensive notes into a series of essays that the *New North-West* published in several installments from January 1879 forward. The editors boasted that the data in the articles "can be relied upon as authentic from the Nez Perce standpoint."

In about the year 1878, Duncan McDonald, Metis son of Angus McDonald, visited Lake McDonald, then known as Terry Lake. Duncan, who had the job of freighting a large amount of supplies to Canada, had intended to go up the North Fork of the Flathead, probably over the old Graves Creek Trail route but, upon finding the route blocked by a band of unfriendly Indians, he swung eastward, traveling the adjacent parallel valley, or McDonald. At the close of the day, accompanied by his companions, a group of Salish Indians, he came upon this lake and camped there overnight. While in camp he carved his name upon the bark of a birch tree. The next day he continued his journey, reaching Canada safely. The tree bearing his name remained for many years near the present village of Apgar. People who saw the name on the tree gradually began to call the lake "McDonald's Lake," and as such the name became fixed.

A few years prior to his discovery of Lake McDonald, Duncan was in charge of the Hudson's Bay Trading Post south of Flathead Lake. In 1874 he made his first trip through

Marias Pass, in company with several Pend Oreille Indians. They traveled on snowshoes and chose this as the shortest route for McDonald from their camp on the Marias to his post on the Flathead. At the summit the Indians turned back, leaving McDonald and his Indian guide to continue alone. This trip showed that the pass could still be used and that it was still known and possibly used by the Indians at times. Later McDonald was to cross this pass several times, but, like so many before him, he left no record of his passing and several years were yet to come before the pass was located and put into general use by the Great Northern Railroad.

Duncan McDonald assumed many roles in Montana society. Not only did he write the first Indian-perspective history, he was also the first American Indian to compile a list of Coyote tales and systematically present them to white audiences. Reporter H. T. Balley called him “the sage of the Flathead.” Like his father, an inveterate storyteller, McDonald first told his versions of Coyote tales over several sittings to University of Montana journalism dean A. L. Stone, who later printed them in a series of articles in 1912.



Duncan McDonald and his wife on horseback, 1907.  
(National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum: Photographer unknown  
2005.093)



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