

Racing for Home: Culture, Ethnicity, and Sport in the Athletic Life of Marathoner Ronald John MacDonald

Peter Ludlow

In the age of exceedingly compensated professional athletes, the importance of amateur athletics within North American society has diminished. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the amateur athlete was a central figure in the emergence of sport as a means of social and cultural expression. Robert Wheeler wrote that the history of sport is one important avenue for gaining a fuller understanding of the past.¹ The career of long distance runner Ronald John MacDonald is one such example. His narrative not only highlights the importance of athletics to society in the United States and Canada, but it also encapsulates the deep cultural connections between the Maritime provinces of Canada and the New England states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His athletic talents made him a sporting hero in Boston but, more importantly, created a sense of pride and achievement for people living in the economically downtrodden areas of northeastern Nova Scotia.

Ronald J. MacDonald was born in the rural village of Fraser's Grant, Antigonish County, Nova Scotia, on September 27, 1875.² He was the son of Lauchlin (Drover) and Elizabeth (Chisholm) MacDonald; his ancestors immigrated from Moidart, Scotland, to Nova Scotia at the turn of the nineteenth century.³ His father, employed in the bustling cattle trade between Bayfield, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland, drowned aboard the ship *Mary Ellen* during a trip in August 1888.⁴ Left without a husband and unable to make a living, Elizabeth moved her family to stay with relatives in the Boston suburb of Cambridgeport.⁵ The decision to immigrate to the "Boston States" was common for many Nova Scotians who were looking for better economic opportunities, and in doing so joined the "diaspora culture" of the period.⁶ The late Raymond A. MacLean wrote, "Boston! One could easily have yelled 'gold!' and received the same effect in Eastern Nova Scotia."⁷ The high numbers of Maritimers who left for New England—25,000 by 1880—along with the geographical proximity of the old land to the new, ensured that traditional cultures were maintained and the relationship with their communities of birth remained strong.⁸ For MacDonald this meant a marked association with the social and religious customs of the Highland Scottish tradition.

By the age of sixteen, MacDonald had lived in the industrious and mercantile Cambridgeport for three years. He was employed as a lineman with the New England

Ludlow is a doctoral candidate in history at Queen's University, Belfast.

Telephone and Telegraph Company and later in the family lunch store on Cambridge Street.⁹ For young men like MacDonald, growing up in urban America during this period meant a familiarity with the emerging phenomenon of athletics. Sport was viewed by elements within society as a method to form a united national culture in a country that had been transformed by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and rapid immigration.¹⁰ One's experience with sport depended largely on one's geographical position because amateur sport during this period was an urban construction.¹¹ For MacDonald and many other young men of Boston, access to modern sport in America came via the local gymnasium and athletic association.

The history of athletic associations in the United States is traced back to 1866 and the founding of the New York Athletic Club.¹² The earliest clubs were elitist and selective, formed not to get people in, but rather, to keep people out.¹³ By the late nineteenth century, however, clubs were founded with an inclusive mandate and were extending their influence deep into the social essence.¹⁴ Neighborhood gymnasiums appeared throughout most cities of the northeast, including, most fortuitously for MacDonald, Cambridgeport. The Cambridgeport Gymnasium Association (CGA) was not as large as the Boston Athletic Association (BAA), but by the time MacDonald joined in 1895, it had a strong contingent of athletes, including Ronald's brother, Alexander. As a prospective long distance runner, MacDonald could not have been more fortunate than to live in Cambridgeport. The city of Boston was the center of track and field in the United States and its nearness to other gymnasiums and to the track at Harvard University meant that the CGA had steady competition and decent facilities in which to train.

It was obvious from the beginning that Ronald MacDonald was going to be more than an average runner. Training under well-known sportsmen John W. Bowler and John McCanley, both of whom were active in the Boston sports scene, MacDonald won his first race in July 1896—a 1-mile handicap held at Newton, Massachusetts.¹⁵ Although a minor race, it was a notable achievement. He formed a friendship with Canadian Richard (Dick) Grant, who was a star track athlete at Harvard.¹⁶ Their training sessions together developed MacDonald's talent and helped to propel him into the spotlight. At the BAA's amateur cross-country race in December 1897, Dick Grant won the 4.75-mile race in a time of 25:58, followed by MacDonald, who traveled the wet and slushy course in the respectable time of 27:54.¹⁷ It was not long before MacDonald began constantly securing strong results.¹⁸ In March 1898, he won an 11-mile cross-country race in Boston in a time of 1:2:2, establishing a new record at that distance.¹⁹ He also ran in team competitions, helping the CGA to a third-place finish at the national championships at Morris Park, New York.²⁰

Although athletic associations such as the CGA offered a lot of exposure, many qualified athletes looked to university sport as a means of gaining more experience and coverage. The first collegiate track and field associations began at Columbia University in 1869 and Yale University in 1872, respectively, and by the 1890s events were popular and competitive.²¹ In the fall of 1897, MacDonald entered Boston College (BC), in Boston's south end, as a special student studying Latin, English, French, and arithmetic.²² Although not registered in a specific degree program, taking courses allowed him to represent the college at intercollegiate athletic events and helped broaden his profile. He performed as well under the colors of BC as he had under the CGA, setting the record for the indoor mile

at 4:39 in the fall of 1897, following that in February 1898 with a second-place finish in a 2-mile race at Hemenway Gym at Harvard. MacDonald's successes on the cinder path with both the CGA and BC were enough for him to claim at least a small amount of success, but being a champion middle distance runner did not guarantee him fame. That celebrity was to be found in a new event capturing the attention of the American sports world.

The popularity of amateur sport in the late nineteenth century cumulated in the organization of major sporting events around the world. The first modern Olympics, held in Athens, Greece, in 1896, exposed the world's athletes to the marathon race, which especially impressed the American team, many of whom belonged to the BAA. Determined to promote the sport in North America, promoters held the first American marathon on September 19, 1896, at Stamford, Connecticut.²³ The success of that race immediately sparked a surge in popularity especially among the middle classes who equated the physical and mental challenge of the marathon as an indicator of male toughness.²⁴ Marathon races featured prominently in local newspapers, and one tobacco company issued a set of cards depicting a runner in each pack of cigarettes. Looking to exploit this popularity, the BAA decided to hold its own marathon event in 1897. The 25-mile race began at Steven's Corner in Ashland and wound its way through Boston, ending at the Irvington Street Oval. The race, won by John J. McDermott of New York, garnered a strong following and was covered by most of the major news media in the area.²⁵ Although MacDonald did not participate in the race, his friend Dick Grant came very close to winning. With this race a success, the BAA marathon became the goal on which the runners of Boston set their sights.

The following year, the BAA marathon was well represented by runners from Boston. Runners from the CGA were participating and Dick Grant was mentioned, along with McDermott, as an early favorite. On Patriot's Day, April 19, 1898, MacDonald took the train to Ashland station where he met members of the media. Standing 5'7" and weighing 142 pounds, with curly light hair, wearing a white shirt with the emblem of the Cambridgeport Boat Club and black trunks with a blue braid, MacDonald joined twenty-five other contestants at the starting line at Steven's Corner. It was a very dry day, and sizeable and boisterous crowds, most of whom rang bells and noisemakers, lined the dusty roads. A number of young boys rode their bicycles alongside their favorite runners whispering words of encouragement or advice.²⁶ Early on, MacDonald remained well behind the leaders, but somewhere between Wellesley and Newton Lower Falls, he made his move. In the words of one *Boston Globe* writer, MacDonald was "noticed to apparently awake out of a stupor, throw his head back, and start running in an altogether different style."²⁷ He pursued the leaders with great determination. In a desperate attempt to take the lead, MacDonald sprinted downhill, gaining on the leader, New York champion, Hamilton Gray, finally catching him at Kent Street in Brookline. Overtaking Gray, MacDonald easily won the race, going the distance in an old pair of bicycle shoes, and doing so without taking a drop of liquid. According to the *Boston Globe*, MacDonald entered the Irvington Oval in style and "with a mighty bound he landed in the center of the cinder path." The awaiting Bostonians put MacDonald on their shoulders and carried him around the field. His time of 2:42:00 was over three minutes faster than Gray and set a new world record. The crowd was ecstatic that a local had won the championship and MacDonald became a household name.

That evening a banquet was held in Cambridgeport for the pride of the CGA, and the runner was presented with a \$150 gold watch.

Ronald MacDonald's championship run was a significant win for two communities: MacDonald became the hometown champion for the sports fans of Massachusetts and in his native Canadian province of Nova Scotia his fame and popularity was even greater. The *Boston Globe* account of his victory was reprinted in various local papers of Nova Scotia and he was the talk of the Maritime athletic world.²⁸ In the small, ethnically Scottish town of Antigonish, the accomplishments of one of their own created a sense of pride in a region that was feeling the effects of a downtrodden economy.²⁹ Sport was an important pursuit of the late nineteenth century in Nova Scotia and for Antigonish to have, as its own, such an accomplished athlete was significant.³⁰ The excitement that MacDonald was capable of generating in Nova Scotia was evident in two trips that he made to the province in the summers of 1898 and 1899. For many Scottish Nova Scotians, MacDonald not only represented the people of the province, but most especially, he also embodied the athletic traditions of old Scotland.³¹ In fact, MacDonald's first major appearance after winning the Boston Marathon was at the athletic games of the Antigonish Highland Society, where he was billed as the "World's Strongest and Fleetest Runner." His exhibition races throughout the province brought large crowds attempting to catch a glimpse of the champion runner, highlighting the value of sport in the Maritimes, despite social, geographical, and economic restrictions.³² Although showered with a number of awards, none was more significant to him than the beautiful gold medal that the citizens of Antigonish gave him in recognition of his achievements.³³ The popularity of MacDonald in Nova Scotia is indicative of the intimate cultural associations between the Maritime Provinces and the New England States at that time. MacDonald won the BAA marathon as both a Bostonian and a Nova Scotian. As such, his athletic accomplishments serve to underscore the many other links between the out-migrants of the Maritimes and their former surroundings.³⁴

Injuries kept MacDonald out of the 1899 Boston Marathon, and in 1900 his training for the upcoming Paris Olympics forced him, once again, into the spectator role. The 1900 field was extremely competitive, and included 1899 champion, Lawrence Brignolia, and Hamilton, Ontario, native John Peter Caffrey. Caffrey not only won the race, but he also shattered MacDonald's world record in a time of 2:39:44. He boasted to a writer of the *Boston Globe*, "I knew my rivals and was confident they could not overtake me."³⁵ While watching the race, MacDonald was impressed with the Canadian and his running style. He admitted, however, that he did not expect to see Caffrey finish the race because of the great pace with which he started, and MacDonald was annoyed that his record had been beaten. MacDonald had complained to the *Globe* reporter that, in 1898, both a sore knee and a strong wind had hampered him, without which he might have set an even faster record. He boldly predicted that he would beat Caffrey's record the following year.³⁶

The 1900 Paris Olympics, which accompanied the world's fair, lasted from May 14 until October 28. The marathon race highlighted what turned out to be the most disorganized Olympics in history. MacDonald traveled to Europe with his brother, Alexander, and Dick Grant. They were joined in Paris by other American runners, including Arthur Newton of New York. The marathon, which began at the Bois de Boulogne on the premises of the Racing Club de France, began at 2:36 in

the afternoon on July 19. Although thirteen runners were announced, seventeen runners took their position at the starting line as temperatures reached as high as 40°C. All the runners were plagued by the heat and disorganization, quickly realizing that although there was ample champagne and wine, there was no water, and in the extreme heat they dehydrated quickly. At the 6-mile mark, three British runners exited the race, citing difficult conditions and congestion on the course.³⁷ The terrain varied from grass to gravel and sand and finally to cobblestone. There were no racing officials along the route; the runners were left on their own to find their way through the French capital. Three hours after the race began, spectators at the finish line watched Michel Theato of Luxembourg cross first to claim the championship. By the time that the American runners—Newton, MacDonald, and Grant—came in fifth, sixth, and seventh, respectively, there was no one left but a small contingent of American supporters.³⁸ The tired and dehydrated Americans immediately cried foul and charged the French runners with cheating. Arthur Newton claimed that he had taken the lead early in the race and was never passed, whereby he was shocked to find out that he had finished fifth. Dick Grant, who finished after Newton, claimed that a cyclist had knocked him down as he was about to pass the leader.³⁹ The most startling claims, however, came from MacDonald.

Upon returning to the United States, MacDonald, angered by what he believed were false accounts of the American showing in the Paris Marathon, wrote a letter to American and Canadian newspapers, giving his version.⁴⁰ He claimed that two days before the race, a member of the racing club of France approached him in a club. The man, after inquiring into MacDonald's condition informed him that no American or Englishmen, "even if they rode the full distance in a steam car, could possibly win."⁴¹ According to MacDonald, the French runners began the race at an extremely fast pace, surprising the Americans who were content to hang back and get their stride. At the 1-mile mark, the American runners came to a fork in the road and were told by the spectators standing nearby to take a left; however, seeing the bobbing heads of their French competitors on the right, they followed. The English runners faced a lot of taunting from the spectators and the French did all they could to bother the runners, although MacDonald fared a little better due to the American flag, which he had tied around his waist. At the 9-mile mark, he claimed to see Arthur Newton leaning against a post, "pretty well played out." Later on, MacDonald and Grant were approached by a Frenchman with a warning that the French runners were riding. Quickly after that, they were offered a ride by a German, who angered by their refusal, told them "Well, the damn French ride, and if you don't you can go to hell as you will be beat."⁴² Evidence of further French trickery came at the 20-mile mark, when MacDonald and Grant met the eventual winner, Michel Theato, whom they had passed at the 5-mile mark. He was as "fresh as a daisy," and approached the Americans, shook their hands, and set out at a "bolt clip." According to MacDonald, of all the contestants, only he and Dick Grant actually ran the whole course. Little has been written on the Paris Marathon, and consequently it is difficult to substantiate MacDonald's account. It does seem clear, however, that the race was less than transparent. MacDonald's claims do carry some weight because he went public with them on numerous occasions. Nonetheless, MacDonald returned to Boston without a medal.

By the spring of 1901, Ronald MacDonald's running career was in a slump. He no longer could claim the world record in the marathon and although cheating marred the Olympic race, he could claim no medal. As a member of the track team at Boston College, he competed in a number of intercollegiate events and fared well in most of them but by April he was concentrating solely on regaining the Boston Marathon. There was increased pressure this time around as he would be going head to head with the defending champion and world record holder. The pressure was heightened owing to MacDonald's boastful prediction that he would break Caffery's record and the fact that almost all of Boston expected him to win.⁴³

Boston was abuzz for the 1901 marathon, and so were the betting parlors. Thousands of dollars were placed on the race, with most putting their money on John Caffery, whose supporters boasted that he was going to beat his own record.⁴⁴ As a consequence of all this gambling, the crowd—conservatively estimated at 25,000—was large and passionate. Photographers met the thirty-eight runners at the starting line, capturing images that would replace the line drawings that had previously accompanied race accounts in the newspapers. It was a cloudless warm day and from the start at Steven's corner, the race was competitive and exciting. A mile into the contest a small group including Caffery, MacDonald, Fred Hughson, and William Davis broke away from the pack. Near Cedar Street at West Newton, with Caffery in the lead, MacDonald overtook Hughson for second place. As the runners neared Cleveland circle, and just as it looked as if MacDonald might make a move on Caffery, one of the most bizarre events in Marathon history took place. MacDonald accepted a soaked sponge from his brother in the crowd. The sponge had been dipped in water from the canteen of a race official. He immediately noticed a "strong pungent odor," but, assuming it was brandy, continued to drink the liquid. Almost immediately his throat began to burn and he developed severe stomach cramps.⁴⁵ He slowed down and began to walk, and soon after, left the race. Caffery, no longer with any serious competition, roared on to victory and reached Exeter Street, in a time of 2:29:23, claiming his second marathon win and shattering his own world record.

The news of the possible drugging of MacDonald set off a debate in the media and the North American athletic community. By coincidence, the sponge, which was apparently used to drug the runner, was tossed into the carriage of MacDonald and it was given to MacDonald's doctor, John S. Thompson.⁴⁶ The doctor brought it home and ran a series of tests and concluded that the runner had indeed been chloroformed.⁴⁷ Dr. Thompson speculated that there was no way the drugging could have been an accident owing to the extent of gambling that had taken place on the event. According to the doctor, MacDonald was drugged so that Caffery would win.⁴⁸ Not everyone was comfortable with this opinion. Herbert Houlton, an executive member of the BAA called MacDonald a "cry baby" and angrily chided him for concocting the story without foundation. Caffery's supporters, such as *Hamilton Herald* sports editor Fred A. Passmore, suggested that Caffery was clearly the better runner and the idea that his supporters had to drug MacDonald in order for Caffery to beat him was absurd. MacDonald's trainer, John Bower, had two theories. The first was that the runner had been drugged by a band of "professional betters."⁴⁹ Secondly, and to him most plausible, was that Dr. Thompson had given

MacDonald some pills that were designed to boost his energy but instead caused him to collapse.⁵⁰ The debate was never settled and rarely mentioned again. For the athletic community, the incident highlighted the growing problem with gambling in sport, but for MacDonald, the incident did significant damage to his reputation in New England. The time was right to contemplate a move from Boston.

In June of 1901, following a series of letdowns on the track, MacDonald decided to get more earnest about his education. He was registered at Boston College as a special student but decided not to continue his studies at the school. He received a handsome scholarship offer from Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and considered enrolling there; however, an encounter with a Catholic priest from his native town of Antigonish changed his mind. In 1901, Rev. Neil MacDonald was in charge of recruiting for St. Francis Xavier University.⁵¹ Saint Francis Xavier was a small but important Catholic college that had two important aims, the first to give Catholics of Eastern Nova Scotia access to postsecondary education and the second to act as a supplier for the Catholic seminaries of North America and Europe.⁵² Owing to the large numbers of former Maritimers living in the Boston area, the university frequently recruited students and solicited funds in Massachusetts. The university president, Rev. Alexander Thompson, the brother of MacDonald's doctor, John Thompson, instructed Rev. Neil MacDonald to approach the runner about attending the college. President Thompson offered to pay Ronald's fees in exchange for offering training in the school's gymnasium.⁵³ An offer of free tuition was too good to turn down even if St. Francis Xavier could not offer the same athletic opportunities as Georgetown. More importantly perhaps, Antigonish was a long way from Boston and was a place where he could obtain an education and enjoy his popularity.⁵⁴ MacDonald's decision to leave Boston and enter St. Francis Xavier was important. The university was full of students who were either former residents or offspring of former residents of the Maritimes. The college's popularity among previous inhabitants represented yet another cultural connection between New England and the Maritimes, a connection that MacDonald was keen to exploit.

Returning to the Maritime Provinces meant an obvious adjustment. From the age of nine, MacDonald knew only the buzz of urban life. His return to Antigonish created a lot of excitement within the town and at the college. He persuaded Dick Grant to travel with him in order to put on a series of races for the benefit of the people of eastern Nova Scotia.⁵⁵ Their tour began in Antigonish, where their race was to be the main event at the annual Antigonish Highland Society athletic events. The opportunity to witness two men of such prestige race against each other brought large crowds and was the focal point of the games. They further added to the excitement by challenging any two men in the province to race against them, adding that the two challengers would have only to run 5 miles whereas MacDonald and Grant would run 10.⁵⁶ Although the heavy condition of the track made it rough going for the runners, they put on an exciting show: MacDonald covered the 10 miles in 1:02:43 and defeated Grant by 40 feet to the delight of the citizens of the town.⁵⁷ They continued their tour on Cape Breton Island by running in a number of races against each other until MacDonald sprained his ankle in a 5-mile run in North Sydney.⁵⁸ The races held throughout Eastern Nova Scotia in the summer of 1901 further enhanced MacDonald's prestige. Most importantly, his acceptance as a sporting hero eased the frustration of recent defeats and brought much needed leisure to Antigonish and eastern Nova Scotia.

Life in Antigonish moved considerably slower than in Boston, but MacDonald's premedical studies and his work at the gymnasium kept him occupied. On a campus with only 788 students, MacDonald was a sporting icon. He ran a number of races under the "X" (Xavier) banner, training regularly on the country roads of Antigonish County, usually a distance of 12 miles a day, which often took him through the Lower South River and Saltsprings area. Residents of Antigonish County were amused as they watched him train along the dusty back roads. Some suggested that his running would suit his career as a medical doctor because when he got a sick call "he'll not have to go to the stable. He'll just grab up his bag and set off on the run, and be halfway there before a horse could be hitched up."⁵⁹ Life in Antigonish was comfortable; his studies were progressing nicely; however, he had unfinished business in Boston and wanted a chance to race in the marathon one more time.

The 1902 Boston Marathon brought out over 100,000 people. As always, MacDonald was considered a serious contender; in fact, most believed that either he or New York runner Sammy Mellor would win the race. Mellor had defeated MacDonald by 10 seconds in a race held in Hamilton, Ontario, in October and they were obviously well matched. As in previous races, bettors had wagered a great deal of money, so much so that defending champion John Caffery decided to pull out at the last minute instead of racing with a minor cramp and thus risk losing his supporters' monies.⁶⁰ MacDonald lined up at the start wearing the blue and white of his college. From the outset until Wellesley Hills, the race was neck and neck between the two runners, but in the hills, in front of the cheering girls of Wellesley College, MacDonald slowed. His supporters did all that they could to encourage him forward but rubbing his hands in a circular motion on his stomach made it clear that he was in trouble. At Newton, Lower Falls, MacDonald in obvious discomfort left the race and was driven home by his brother.⁶¹

The 1902 Boston Marathon had been a last hurrah of sorts for MacDonald. He was entering his final premed year at St. Francis Xavier and he had a lot of commitments. Defeat in Boston did not change the esteem that the people of Nova Scotia, and in particular, the Scots of Antigonish, had for him and he wanted to give back. In collaboration with St. Francis Xavier President Thompson, MacDonald decided to bring the world's best athletes to eastern Nova Scotia. These athletes, according to MacDonald, would put on a show that would "surpass anything of its kind ever held in Nova Scotia."⁶² Numerous athletes were approached, such as Wesley Coe, a native of Boston and Oxford's champion shot putter, but academic commitments kept most, including Coe, from attending. He did have some successes, convincing William (Billy) Le Barre to face him in a rematch of the *Hamilton Herald* road race the previous fall. The race, which was held in conjunction with the annual college athletic events on June 13, 1902, drew the largest crowd ever assembled in the athletic grounds of Antigonish.⁶³ The 5-mile race was never really close and by the end, MacDonald had lapped his opponent, setting the Canadian 5-mile record at 25:47.⁶⁴ Later that summer, he gave a 2-mile exhibition run at Pictou, Bridgeport, and Whitney Pier and defeated the well-known aboriginal runner John Prosper in a 3-mile contest at Reserve Mines, Cape Breton, covering the distance in 15:50. On November 18, 1902, MacDonald organized the first-ever indoor track meet in Eastern Canada, when Irish Champion John C. Lordon agreed to travel to Antigonish.⁶⁵ The first race, a distance of 3 miles, took place at the new St. Francis Xavier rink and was known as the *electric lights games*. The "Cigar Box" was packed with spectators who came out to get a look at their champion. MacDonald, wearing the

blue and white of his college, defeated Lordon, who was dressed in Irish green, in a time of 15:38, breaking the Canadian indoor record for 3 miles.⁶⁶ A week later, MacDonald again defeated Lordon in front of a packed house in the Rosslyn Rink in Sydney. Not disappointing the local papers, Lordon praised MacDonald for his wonderful endurance.⁶⁷ The following summer, MacDonald brought 1899 Boston Marathon champion Lawrence Brignoli to Antigonish. With the home crowd on his side, “Ronnie J” did not dissatisfy and easily defeated Brignoli in a 5-mile race.⁶⁸ The races held in Eastern Nova Scotia throughout the summers of 1902 and 1903 are very significant. In this brief period of time, eastern Nova Scotia was host to some of the best runners and athletes in the world. The great crowds that came out to watch the races show the importance of sport in Canadian society, and undoubtedly these races began an interest that led to the creation of a number of major road races in Nova Scotia.⁶⁹ Most importantly for the people of Nova Scotia, the races offered a break from the daily routine and demonstrated that not all of the exploits of the province’s athletes had to take place on foreign soil.

In the fall of 1903, MacDonald finished his premed course at St. Francis Xavier and returned to Boston to begin his medical studies at Tufts College. Acceptance into medical school required a greater commitment to his studies, and as a result he gave up active running.⁷⁰ Having decided that he would not reenter the Boston Marathon, he did agree in 1905 to become the handler for Robert J. Fowler of the Cambridgeport gym. Fowler, who figured to have a good chance to win, blamed his eventual loss in the race to the fact that MacDonald forced him to hold back too long: “When I asked for a chance to go faster, I was refused.”⁷¹ It seemed that MacDonald simply could not avoid controversy at the marathon. Not intending to take part in any more major events, he accepted a \$300 offer to race Sam Myers at the end of July, in a 3-mile contest, effectively ending his amateur career.⁷² By the time of his graduation from Tufts Medical College in the spring of 1907, he accepted a postgraduate position at Harvard Medical School and officially retired from running.

Ronald MacDonald’s professional life took place mainly in the Dominion of Newfoundland. The life of a medical doctor in the relative isolation of Port au Port on Newfoundland’s west coast is a feature in its own right. His practice covered an immense area and he had little occasion to race. In 1923, commemorating his twenty-fifth anniversary of winning the Boston Marathon, he wrote of the contrast in his life since that day: “Yesterday found me trailing along with a dog team, through frost and snow, a distance of 50 miles to reach a dear friend who was taken down with pneumonia.”⁷³ Periodically, however, the Antigonish newspaper, *The Casket*, would carry a small notice announcing that MacDonald had won a marathon in St. John’s or a small church picnic race.⁷⁴ In 1930, now married with a family, MacDonald wrote the *Boston Globe*, crediting the marathon for the success of his professional life: “A marathon victory should be a great tonic to a boy, a tonic to urge him on to greater things in life.”⁷⁵

In 1938 he and his family left Newfoundland, returning to Antigonish to retire. Although a new generation had grown without witnessing him race, MacDonald was still a sporting icon. His last public appearance at an athletic event came in July of 1942 when he acted as a starter at the Antigonish Highland Games track meet. He had gained a lot of weight and consequently his health grew worse. In the

autumn of 1942, he suffered a severe stroke, and although he lived for five more years, the former world record holder found it difficult to even walk through his home. He died on September 3, 1947.⁷⁶

The racing career of Ronald J. MacDonald is important for a number of reasons. Although he could claim to his credit over 135 prizes, he was not the most successful runner of his time or the most famous Nova Scotia runner—that distinction belongs to Johnny Miles.⁷⁷ MacDonald's career, however, highlights the emerging importance of athletics to the middle classes of the United States and Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century. A sports icon on both sides of the border, his career encapsulated the close cultural connections that existed between the northeastern United States and the Maritime Provinces of Canada. An original inductee into the Nova Scotia sports hall of fame, MacDonald's desire to bring some of the world's best athletes to Nova Scotia helped develop sport in the province and created a sense of pride in a community that had been decimated by a poor economy and years of out-migration.

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Newspapers

The Boston Globe
The Casket
The Globe and Mail
The Halifax Morning Chronicle
The Boston Post
The Hamilton Spectator

Outings Monthly Review of Amateur Sports and Pastimes, February 1898, XXXI, and May 1898, XXXII

Notes

1. Robert F. Wheeler, "Teaching Sport as History, History through Sport," *The History Reader* 11 (1978): 2.
2. There has been a discrepancy in MacDonald's birth date. He has been wrongly listed as being born on June 16, 1876, in numerous publications. However, his death certificate and census information gives September 27, 1875, as his date of birth.
3. See J.M Bumsted, *The People's Clearance: Highland Immigration to British North America, 1770-1815* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982); D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto: M&S, 1974); Andrew H. Clark, "Old World Origins and Religious Adherence in Nova Scotia," *The Geographical Review*

50 (1960): 317-344; Charles Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953); Donald MacKay, *Scotland Farewell: The People of the Hector* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1980); D.J. Rankin, *A History of the County of Antigonish, Nova Scotia* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929).

4. The *Mary Ellen* was a 334-ton barkentine built at Havre Boucher, Nova Scotia. It was owned by the Crispo family and operated by Captain DeCoste of Havre Boucher. It was lost in August 1888 with all hands somewhere between St. John's, Newfoundland, and Mulgrave, Nova Scotia.

5. During this period, there were an estimated 3,300 Maritimers living in and around the Cambridge area. See Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2000), 132. Elizabeth (Chisholm) MacDonald had seven children. She died May 20, 1895.

6. See D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978); George A. Rawlyk, *The Atlantic Provinces and the Problems of Confederation* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1979); John G. Reid, *Six Crucial Decades: Times of Change in the History of the Maritimes* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1987); Ernst R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989); Ernst R. Forbes, *Maritime Rights: The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927, A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1979).

7. D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 185.

8. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 212.

9. *The Casket*, February 28, 1901.

10. Mark Dyreson, "The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s," *Journal of Sport History* 16 (1989): 262.

11. Alan Metcalfe "The Meaning of Amateurism: A Case Study of Canadian Sport, 1884-1970," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 26 (1995): 36.

12. For information of athletic clubs in Canada, see Charles Ballem, *Abegweit Dynasty 1899-1954: The Story of the Abegweit Amateur Athletic Association* (Charlottetown, 1986); Don Morrow, "The Powerhouse of Canadian Sport: The Montreal Amateur Athletic Association, Inception to 1909," *Journal of Sport History* (1981): 20-39; R. Wayne Simpson, "The Elite and Sport Club Membership, Toronto, 1827-1881" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 1987).

13. J. Willis and R. Wettan, "Social Stratification in New York City Athletic Clubs, 1865-1915," *Journal of Sport History Review* 3 (1976): 54.

14. Frederic L. Paxson, "The Rise of Sport," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4 (1917): 156.

15. John W. Bowler was a native of Charlesbank, Massachusetts. He served as track coach at a number of gymnasiums and colleges, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1901, he served as the superintendent of all Boston gymnasiums.

16. Richard (Dick) Grant was born in Oneida, Haldimand County, Ontario, in 1871. His father, Rev. Alexander Grant, was a prominent clergyman in St. Mary's Ontario, where Dick grew up. Dick attended the University of Toronto for one year before entering Harvard University in Boston. After his running career ended, he served as the track coach at the University of Minnesota and as athletic director at the University of Havana. Blind and alone, he died in the late 1950s in a home for the aged in St. Catharine's, Ontario. Thanks go to Leslie Symons at the St. Mary's Museum in St. Mary's, Ontario, for Grant's biographical information.

17. MacDonald finished a respectable sixth. *Outings Monthly Review of Amateur Sports and Pastimes* 31 (1898): 521.

18. MacDonald finished second in the New England 3-mile championship on July 4, 1897, at Wood Island, East Boston.

19. St. Francis Xavier College, First Outdoor Meet, pamphlet, p. 13. MG 45/2/530, St. Francis Xavier University Archives (hereafter, STFXUA).
20. The high-profile steeplechase race took place on April 2, 1898. The course was 6.25 miles in length and contained on water jump and eight other obstacles. The runners were plagued by a cold wind and rain, which made the field soft. *Outings Monthly review of Amateur Sports and Pastimes* 32 (1898): 214.
21. See Guy Lewis, "The Beginning of Organized Collegiate Sport," *American Quarterly* 22 (1970), 222-229.
22. Boston College was founded by the Society of Jesus in 1863 and opened its doors on September 5, 1864. It was founded in part because of the restrictions of Harvard University against immigrants and Catholics. Originally located on Harrison Avenue in Boston's South End, where it shared quarters with Boston College High School, the University outgrew its urban setting toward the end of its first 50 years, moving to then-rural Chestnut Hill. See Jack Frost, *The Crowded Hilltop: Boston College in its 100th Year* (Hawthorne Press, 1962). Thanks to Robert Burns, senior reference librarian at the John J. Burns library, Boston College, for information on MacDonald's scholastic career at that university.
23. John J. McDermott won the race in a time of 3:25:55.
24. Steven A. Riess, "Sport and the Redefinition of American Middle-Class Masculinity, 1840-1900," in *Major Problems in American Sport History*, ed. Steven A. Riess (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 194.
25. John J. McDermott was a member of the Pastime Athletic Club of New York City. He finished the race in 2:55:10.
26. Tom Derderian, *Boston Marathon: The First Century of the World's Premier Running Event* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), 9.
27. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 9
28. Much of MacDonald's running career is chronicled in the Antigonish newspaper *The Casket*, which is one of Canada's oldest. While a student at St. Francis Xavier, MacDonald solicited subscriptions for the paper throughout Cambridge, Massachusetts. See R.A. MacLean, *The Casket: From Gutenberg to Internet: The Story of a Small Town Weekly* (Antigonish: The Casket, 1992).
29. See Laurie C.C. Stanley-Blackwell and R.A. MacLean, *Historic Antigonish Town and County* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2004); D. Macfarlane and R.A. MacLean, *Drummer on Foot* (Antigonish: The Casket, 1976); D.J. Rankin, *A History of the County of Antigonish, Nova Scotia*. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929); Patrick F. Walsh, *The History of the Town of Antigonish* (Antigonish: The Casket, 1989); D.G. Whidden, *The History of the Town of Antigonish* (Antigonish: The Casket, 1934).
30. Michael J. Smith, "There's No Penalty When You Hit the Fence: Sporting Activities in Central and Eastern Nova Scotia, 1880s to 1920s," *Sport History Review* 27 (1996), 194.
31. Athletic competitions were an important part of Highland society. In the United States, Highland athletic culture was maintained by the Caledonia clubs, which were first organized in the 1850s. From the mid-1850s to the 1870s, the Caledonians were the most important promoters of track and field in the United States. See Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Sub communities and the Rise of American Sport," *American Quarterly*, 29 (1977), 355-369; Gerald Redmond, *The Caledonian Games in Nineteenth century America* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1971).
32. Michael J. Smith "There's No Penalty When You Hit the Fence," 201.
33. *The Casket*, February 28, 1901.
34. There are numerous examples in regional newspapers highlighting the connections between the Maritime Provinces and New England. The Boston papers routinely carried articles regarding these connections. In the summer of 1903, the *Boston Post* reported on the celebration of 50 years in the priesthood of Bishop John Cameron of Antigonish. The *Boston Post* reported that there were hundreds of people living in the Boston area who had grown up under the tutelage of the Bishop. *The Boston Post*, July 17, 1903.

35. *The Boston Globe*, April 20, 1900.
36. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 18.
37. David F. Martin and Roger Gynn, *The Olympic Marathon* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2000), 31.
38. Arthur Newton finishing fifth was timed at 4:04:12. Although there is no official time recorded, most accounts suggest that MacDonald finished before Grant.
39. Bill Mallon, *The 1900 Olympic Games: Results for all Competitors in All Events, with Commentary* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 10.
40. After the Paris Exposition, MacDonald traveled throughout the British Isles, visiting the birthplace of his grandfather in Scotland.
41. *The Casket*, October 4, 1900.
42. *The Casket*, October 4, 1900.
43. *The Globe and Mail*, April 19, 1901.
44. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 19.
45. *The Boston Post*, April 21, 1901.
46. John S. Thompson was a native of Cloverville, Antigonish County. He was born on December 25, 1863, and attended St. Francis Xavier University and Georgetown University Medical School. After spending three years as a ship's physician in the United States Fisheries service, he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and began a medical practice. He died on January 8, 1939 while on a visit to Antigonish. Ronald MacDonald served as a pallbearer at his funeral. He was a brother of Rev. Alexander Thompson, president of St. Francis Xavier. Thanks to Kathleen Mackenzie, archivist at St. Francis Xavier University for information on Thompson.
47. *The Boston Globe*, April 22, 1901.
48. *The Hamilton Spectator*, April 22, 1901.
49. *The Hamilton Spectator*, April 22, 1901.
50. Bowles cited the case of a Brown University runner, Dave Hall, who after taking some pills in a marathon in New York City got ill and collapsed. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 20.
51. Rev. Neil MacDonald (1867–1907). Rev. MacDonald was on the staff of St. Francis Xavier from 1900 to 1902 and was involved in recruiting for the university throughout the Maritime Provinces and New England.
52. See, James Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1996); William X. Edwards, "The MacPherson Tompkins Era of St. Francis Xavier University," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association* 20 (1952-1953); Anthony A. Johnston, *A History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia*, Vol., 1, 2 (Antigonish: St. Francis Xavier Press, 1960, 1971); Laurence K. Shook, *Catholic Post-Secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada: A History*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).
53. Rev. Dr. Alexander Thompson (1865–1936). President of St. Francis Xavier University from 1898 to 1906. Rev. Alexander Thompson to Ronald J. MacDonald, June 6, 1901, Thompson Presidential Papers (hereafter TPP), STFXUA, RG5/8/4438.
54. Ronald J. MacDonald to Rev. Alexander Thompson, July 19, 1901, TPP, STFXUA, RG5/8/4444.
55. To ensure that a race received proper attention in the local media, a champion racer required a rival. Convincing an accomplished runner like Dick Grant to travel to Nova Scotia helped ensure the success of the races.
56. *The Casket*, August 15, 1901.
57. *The Casket*, August 27, 1901.
58. *The Casket*, September 5, 1901.

59. *The Casket*, April 24, 1947.
60. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 22.
61. *The Casket*, April 24, 1902.
62. Ronald J. MacDonald to Rev. Alexander Thompson, April 1, 1902, TPP, STFXUA, RG5/8/730.
63. The race had originally been scheduled for May; however, MacDonald believed that June would be better especially because the farmers' crops would have been planted, thus allowing them to attend. Le Barre failed to arrive in Antigonish on the morning train, so the race was postponed until the afternoon. Ronald J. MacDonald to Rev. Alexander Thompson, April 1, 1902, TPP, STFXUA, RG5/8/730.
64. *The Casket*, June 19, 1902.
65. John C. Lordon was known as the Irish Champion but was in fact a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and belonged to MacDonald's old gymnasium in Cambridgeport. Lordon won the 1903 Boston Marathon and participated in the marathon in the 1904 Olympics held in St. Louis, Missouri.
66. *The Excelsior*, December 1902, Vol. 7.
67. MacDonald finished the Sydney race in a time of 25:45. *The Halifax Morning Chronicle*, November 21, 1902.
68. *The Casket*, July 30, 1903.
69. MacDonald also ran exhibition races at local church picnics and organized a tour of the industrial areas of Cape Breton in July of 1902 (*The Casket*, July 24, 1902). After the races held by MacDonald, a number of others were organized: YMCA cup (1903), Kennedy cup (1907), Nathanson cup (1919), Whitney Pier (1930), the Willow Tree Road Race (1904), Major's cup (1907), the Rhodes cup (1909), Amherst's News and Sentinel Road Race (1914), Yarmouth Road Race (1932), Dartmouth's Natal Day Road Race (1910), Epstein cup (1927), Marcus cup (1927), Cleveland Garage cup (1928), Layton-Lorrie cup (1930), Herald and Mail full marathon (1927), Cape Breton marathon (1932).
70. During the 1903 Boston Marathon, MacDonald put his knowledge of the race to good use and acted as a correspondence for *The Casket*.
71. Derderian, *Boston Marathon*, 35.
72. *The Casket*, July 20, 1905.
73. *The Casket*, April 1923.
74. MacDonald won the St. John's Marathon on August 20, 1909, and defeated his old rival, John Lordon, in a time of 3:07:00. *The Casket*, September 9, 1909.
75. *The Boston Globe*, April 19, 1930. MacDonald married Ada Marie Pieroway (1888–1964). She was a native of St. George's, Newfoundland. They were married on September 4, 1913, in Watertown, Massachusetts. They had five children: Marion, Ronald J., Gerald, Gwinnie, and Bernard.
76. MacDonald's funeral and burial was held in his native parish of Heatherton, Antigonish County.
77. See Floyd Williston, *Johnny Miles: Nova Scotia's Marathon King* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1990); Carolyn Calpin, "The Training Methods of an Elite Marathoner in the 1920s: A Case Study of Johnny C. Miles," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 17 (1986), 71-84.