

Documents:

A. J. MacDonald's Visits to the Shakers

The Beinecke Library of Yale University holds a remarkable archive of primary source accounts of visits to communal settlements conducted by Scotsman A. J. MacDonald. John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of the Oneida Community, relied heavily on MacDonald's papers while writing his *History of American Socialisms*, republishing some of MacDonald's words nearly verbatim. MacDonald visited two Shaker communities: Union Village, Ohio, and Watervliet, New York. In his book Noyes opted not to avail himself of these visitor's accounts. Choosing instead to publish a lengthier, more sensational account, that MacDonald had acquired written by a witness to the New Era, or Era of Manifestations, during the 1840s, (pp. 597-612). Even this account was edited down, according to a note by Noyes on page 612.

We are pleased to present here for the first time in print MacDonald's previously unpublished accounts of his visits to the Shakers. Both are remarkably rich in detail and offer particularly striking descriptions of Shaker worship and singing. Yale's excellent collections landing page for the A. J. MacDonald writings on American Utopian Communities (GEN MSS 1394) provides a thorough overview of MacDonald and his collection. We have reprinted it here as a preface to the accounts.

A. J. MacDonald writings on American Utopian Communities (GEN MSS 1394)

Overview

The collection contains writings and research material on seventy utopian associations compiled by A. J. MacDonald for his proposed volume "The Communities of the United States." The contents range from notes and brief sketches of communities to more extensive profiles based on MacDonald's personal visits, his interviews with residents and colleagues, and transcriptions from contemporary publications. Also included are the printed materials such as prospectuses, constitutions and by-laws, and stock certificates that he collected in his travels, and visual material from published wood engravings to the graphite and watercolor sketches MacDonald

made on site. Utopian communities particularly well represented are the Brook Farm Phalanx, the Clermont Phalanx, New Harmony, the Icarian Community, the North American Phalanx, the Oneida Community, the Prairie Home Community, the Skaneateles Community, the Sylvania Association, the Wisconsin Phalanx, and several Shaker settlements. Macdonald also wrote about two communities outside the United States, the Brazilian Experiment and the Venezuelan Experiment of the Tropical Emigration Society, and about the utopian leaders A. J. Davis, Charles Fourier, Orson S. Murray, Robert Owen, Jemima Wilkinson, and Frances Wright.

Biographical / Historical

The first biographical sketch of A. J. Macdonald was written by John Humphrey Noyes, the collection's donor and the founder of the Oneida Community in central New York State. Noyes acquired Macdonald's manuscripts sometime in the mid-1860s, and introduced him in a column he titled "Our Muck-Heap," published in the October 12, 1868, issue of *The Circular*, the Oneida Community's weekly paper:

The writer and compiler of this mass was A. J. Macdonald, of whom we must give a respectful account. When we lived in Brooklyn some seventeen years ago, this man called on us several times on his business of collecting these observations on socialist experiments, and finally he seemed to take a really friendly interest in our Community, and we became acquainted with him. Our memory of him is imperfect; but an outline of his person remains in our imagination. He was a short, small man, with black hair and sharp eyes. He had a good-natured look, but seemed a little sad. We imagined that the sad scenes he met with while looking after the history of so many short-lived Communities, had given him a tinge of melancholy. He was indeed the 'Old Mortality' of Socialism, wandering about the country from grave to grave, patiently deciphering the epitaphs of defunct 'Phalanxes.' We learned from himself that he was a Scotchman by birth, and a printer by trade; that he was an admirer and disciple of [the Welsh industrialist and social reformer Robert] Owen, and came from the 'old country' partly to see and follow the fortunes of his master's experiments in

Socialism: but finding Owenism in ruins and Fourierism going to ruin, he took upon himself the task of making a book, that should give future generations the benefit of the lessons taught by these attempts and failures. His own attempt was a failure. He gathered a huge mass of materials, wrote his preface, and then died of the cholera. Our record of his last visit is dated February, 1854.

Understandably focused on utopianism in his sketch, Noyes overlooked many other facets of A. J. Macdonald's decade of accomplishments in America. His peripatetic life left only a few clues in published sources such as newspapers and city directories, though others can be found in his writings in the collection; many of his personal details were edited out by Noyes when he was preparing Macdonald's manuscripts for use in his volume *The History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1870).

A. J. Macdonald's first and middle names are not known, nor is the place and date of his departure from Great Britain and arrival in the United States. He wrote of visiting Robert Owen's New Harmony experiment in 1841 (leaf 460, Venezuelan Experiment) and titled his essay about the community "New Harmony in 1842" (leaves 578–614). Noyes, in his November 9, 1868, column in *THE CIRCULAR* stated that for Macdonald, New Harmony was "the very Mecca of his devotion" and that "Here he spent his first eighteen months in this country." By 1844 Macdonald was living in Cincinnati, then one of the publishing centers in the United States, and participated in the founding of the Clermont Phalanx in March of that year; he revisited the settlement in July and took a view in watercolors (leaf 242). Macdonald's essays reveal that in 1844 he visited communities around the state of Ohio, including the Prairie Home Community, D. A. Brooke's Experiment, and the Union Village Shaker settlement, but in March 1845 he was in New York City and attended Robert Owen's lectures at the Minerva Rooms (leaf 507). By that fall he was living in Albany, New York, where on October 26th he encountered Owen on the street (leaf 508) and enjoyed a visit with him at the home of the artist and abolitionist Julius R. Ames. Macdonald remained in Albany for at least three years, and visited the Shaker community in nearby Watervliet in September 1847 (leaves 671–76).

While he may also have been a printer as Noyes recalled, Macdonald was by his own admission a bookbinder, according to his report on his visit

to Union Village in September 1844 (leaf 678). During his time in Albany he edited a gift book, *The Rainbow for 1847* (Albany: A. L. Harrison, and New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), for which he contributed essays on honesty and on the village of Port Huron, Ohio. Immediately distinctive for being the first gift book ever issued in Albany, THE RAINBOW has remained an exemplar for its unusual “patent stereographic binding” signed by the book’s publisher, Albany bookbinder Anthony L. Harrison. Macdonald worked in Harrison’s shop, as evidenced in the advertisement he placed in the March 31, 1848, issue of the ALBANY EVENING JOURNAL announcing that he, “of London, (Late Foreman to Mr. A. L. Harrison),” had just opened his own bookbindery. His single appearance in any Albany city directory was at that same time (*Hoffman’s Albany Directory and City Register for the Years 1848/1849*) where he was listed as a bookbinder. Also in 1848, Macdonald’s philosophical essay *Monuments, Grave Stones, Burying Grounds, Cemeteries, Temples, Etc.*, was issued in pamphlet form by Albany’s great printer/publisher Joel Munsell; in it he made an argument against raising monuments, including tombstones, to the dead or to the living.

By January 1851, A. J. Macdonald was settled in New York City and employed as a finisher at E. Walker and Son’s New York Book-bindery, where he contributed his skills to a grand paneled binding on a Bible bound for display at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London (NEW YORK SPECTATOR, January 30, 1851; see also the verso of leaf 302). At the same time he was steadily compiling material for his proposed volume “The Communities of the United States,” and in March 1851 prepared a circular letter of inquiry (leaf 1) sent from his address at 75 Nassau St. to those who might be able assist him. The letter also outlined his publication plans, suggesting as models works by P. Douglass Gorrie and Sir Charles Lyell that had recently been issued in New York and London. Macdonald continued to visit communities outside the city including Modern Times in Brentwood, New York (June 1852), the Raritan Bay Community in Perth Amboy, New Jersey (September 1853), and the North American Phalanx in Monmouth County, New Jersey (three times between 1851 and 1853), as he continued to work on his manuscript; many of the leaves have his editorial markings such as “Complete” or “wants reading once more.” In the four narratives based on personal visits to Ohio communities and his essay on New Harmony, Macdonald notes that the contents were extracted from his “Travels in search of employment,” a manuscript not present in the collection, and one whose title suggests that

his emigration from Great Britain may have been driven by economics, with his research on utopians a valuable but ancillary project.

Macdonald's name appeared as "McDonald" in the Albany city directory and his newspaper advertisement, as well as on the printed title page, table of contents, and essay bylines in *THE RAINBOW*; the volume was issued with a second, engraved, title page on which his name was spelled correctly. On his Munsell title page, his printed circular letter, and in every instance of an autograph signature on his manuscripts, it was always spelled "A. J. Macdonald."

John Humphrey Noyes, in his introduction to *The History of American Socialisms*, again wrote that Macdonald died of cholera in New York in 1854. Noyes provided no specific place or date, but it is certainly likely that the "sombre pilgrim" was one of the city's 2,509 victims of the great epidemic that year. In April 1854, A. J. Macdonald signed and dated the manuscript of his preface (leaves 2–5), making it his final known contribution to his unfinished work.

Custodial History

The material was organized into its present arrangement by John Humphrey Noyes and his son Victor Cragin Noyes in the 1860s. John Humphrey Noyes, a founder of the Oneida Community, acquired the manuscripts in the mid-1860s from one of Macdonald's relatives, and wrote about the collection in a column titled "Our Muck-Heap," published in the Oneida Community's weekly paper *THE CIRCULAR* (vol. 5, no. 30, October 12, 1868, page 236): "When it came into our hands it was in the loosest state of disorder; but we have strung the leaves together, paged them, and made an index of their contents."

The leaves were numbered in pencil straight through the collection, whether the contents were manuscript, printed, or graphic material. The binding strips affixed by Victor Noyes are still attached to Macdonald's papers from leaf 229 to the end, and the album's front and back covers are in Box 3, folders 90-91. The index prepared by Victor Cragin Noyes and copied over by George Washington Noyes is in Box 3, folder 89. A "Catalogue of the McDonald Materials," a precis of Macdonald's writings prepared by Victor Noyes, is in the Oneida Community Collection at the Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Syracuse, New York.

John Humphrey Noyes provided an overall description of Macdonald's papers in a second column, "Our Muck-Heap, No. II" (vol. 5, no. 31, October 19, 1868, page 244), and wrote articles on each community in forty subsequent columns appearing in *The Circular* through July 19, 1869 (vol. 6, no. 18); the second half of his columns were titled "American Socialisms." In a column published on February 7, 1870 (vol. 6, no. 47, page 372), Noyes addressed the critics of his book and mentioned that anyone may "consult the original manuscripts in the library of Yale College."

Union Village, Ohio, 1844

Visit to "Union ~~Home~~ Village"
near Lebanon Ohio.—

Friday September 6, 1844, we parted with our "kind Friend", on the Lebanon road and directed our course at once for Shaker Village. The weather was finer than it had lately been and consequently we felt more cheerful. The distance to the "Shakers" was about 18 Miles, and, filled with interesting thoughts regarding community, we marched for four or five hours at a good steady pace, stopping a short time at Harveysburgh on the way, and arrived, in the Vicinity of Union Home about two o'clock. A little Stream ran across our road through which Horse Teams had to ford—We crossed upon a plank and some Stones and soon found ourselves in the Shaker Settlement. We knew it must be their property for from the description we had often heard of them we were led to anticipate seeing such roads fences and orchards as we then beheld—We had travelled on foot over sixty Miles and by Waggon nearly the same distance through portions of Logan, Champaign, Clark, Green and Warren Counties, but had no where seen such an orderly place as we now looked upon—There was a long, broad road extending as far as the eye could reach; it had a side walk of "Slabs"; well ordered fences for its whole extent, very extensive and clean orchards on each side, and here and there scattered at irregular distances, large Brick and framed Houses.—

At the commencement of the Road on the left, stood a large three or four story framed House which looked very unpicturesque but very clean—this we learned was the Sisters Dwelling and within the front Fence we saw two or three of them moving about like Ghosts. We soon however met a "Brother" with two fine Horses and enquired of him where the Hotel or

Visitor quarters were, he informed us, that they kept no Hotel now, but if we wished to gain any information regarding their Society or see the Elders, we must call at a Frame House to which he pointed, lying on our right. Accordingly to that House we proceeded and on the way, passed a long low framed building, which we found contained workshops for the “Brothers”—we also passed a very large and unfinished brick building which like the “Frames” had its ground plan in the form of the letter T; We learned that this Building was to accommodate one hundred persons as a Dwelling, on arriving at the proper quarters we were admitted and invited into a Room by a Man of middle age, dressed in the Shaker Garb. On entering and taking a Seat I was surprised to see this Shaker Brother engaged in sewing Books. I soon entered into conversation with him relative to our object in calling, but found it very difficult to learn any thing from him; he informed us, that they Society did not accommodate Strangers now—they formerly did but had been so much annoyed and insulted by rude persons who visited them, that they felt compelled to discontinue the Hotel so that they might remain peaceful and undisturbed in their Home—he pointed to another building in the distance to which he said those persons were sent who wished to remain and be probationers in the views of their Society—He avoided anything like argument, but upon my making known that I was a Book binder and offering to shew him how to improve in his sewing he became more talkative and interesting, he said he had been in this place for thirty years, and that they (the Society) had lived there in peace during that period, though when they first attempted to form the Settlement, they were much opposed by the people of the surrounding Country, who objected to the Society settling amongst them through having rude notions of what the Shakers opinion and practices were and supposing all manner of strange things regarding them—the Country people also threatened to force them from the place but the Society petitioned the State Legislature to grant them permission to remain there for one year and agreed that if during that time they had been found guilty of any offence against the Laws of the State or infringed in anyway upon the rights of the surrounding people they would willingly submit at once to be expelled from that locality. From that time until this however they had never been annoyed save by the occasional visit of ignorant and vulgar persons who often in a state of intoxication would come to their Village for sport and ridicule their peculiar ceremonies—he then offered to bring in the Elders if we wished to have any conversation regarding their principles, but we told him that

though this was the object of our visit, we hoped we could obtain some refreshment before our interview commenced, as we were very hungry—he explained that this was contrary to their usual custom yet in a few minutes a little Bell tingled and we were informed that some provisions were ready for us in a back room- This Room I may safely say was the cleanest I ever saw in my life, it was their Dining Room, and had two long Tables in it, one for the Brothers, and the other for the Sisters,—at the end of one of these Tables there was spread some Bread Butter Milk Apple butter peeches cheese and pies; each Article of the very best quality. Every thing seemed hushed as the apparition of one of the Sisters glided out of the Room as we approached, without even taking a glance at us and I felt almost afraid to breathe—After a hearty meal we returned to the sitting room and were immediately joined by three portly looking elderly men in Shakers Garb—there were the elders and they appeared to be tolerably intelligent—we then commenced our enquiries and my companion being well read in Scripture (for he seemed to have it at his fingers end) was a match for the three of them in all the questions and replies which ensued between us— They argued on celibacy especially and I rather thought my Friend had the advantage of them—they examined the subject of Divine Revelation and we were informed by these elders that they had recently had a revelation from God in that place and in such a positive manner did they describe this revelation that I opened my Eyes with astonishment and put this Question direct to the Elder beside me:—“Do you know that you have had a revelation from God, are you sure of it?”—“We know it” he replied most decidedly—I could say no more, but express how impossible it was for me to believe in such things and how unreasonable they appeared to be. We told them some of our peculiar views and in what we had been engaged and how anxious we were to be good and find out the truth. “Well” said they “you are like men who have reasoned and reasoned until you have lost yourselves in a great wood, and you sit down upon a Stone and get bewildered calling upon someone to help you out— You can only get out of your difficulty through us. We have known many like you and have seen the progress of such. We know all about these Community Movements and we know that they are all in vain and can never succeed, you will have to do like us or you will never succeed” and they concluded by saying “We can do nothing for you”— After three or four hours spent in this way we left the place in a strange state of mind and wended our way in the Sunset, from the Shaker Village — We saw with pleasure as we passed,

their clean houses their fine orchards and their beautiful fields and woods we also gazed upon their Horses and Cows and concluded they were the finest we had ever seen, but we could not live happy, if we had to adopt the (to us) gross Superstitions and absurdities of the Shakers.

Watervliet, New York, 1847

Visit to Watervliet
near Albany. N.Y.

Sunday—September 1st 1847—In company with some Friends I paid a visit to the Shaker Settlement at Watervliet—I may here mention that the Geographical position of that place has in several instances been erroneously stated, it is situate in a N W direction about six miles from Albany the Capital of the State of New York in the Township of Watervliet on a little Stream called the Nisquana.

As this was the first place where the “United Society of Believers” — commenced their experiment it is the most historically interesting and it is here where my Friend S resided.—

In Albany we hired a Carriage for the day which cost Four Dollars and one of my acquaintances drove, the country we passed through was not interesting after leaving the Hudson River, the Soil is very poor being sandy with a vegetation of Scrub Oak, stunted Pines, and Mullens—On nearing the Shaker Village the superior order and culture of the Fields, shewed what industry and perseverance could do with an inferior surface—

As it was near Church time I had to hurry and on arriving at the Village at once entered the Building devoted to worship, it is the same one ~~my friend S described in his narative~~ alluded to in the history page as having been the first Dwellinghouse erected by Ann Lee—on entering I saw the Brothers coming to meeting from their different homes marching in a line two deep, at the same time I saw coming two or three waggons, laden with the Sisters which appeared to me a very novel and pleasing sight—the Brothers were dressed partly in the style of Quakers and partly in the fashion of sixty years ago they wore long brown sack coats of a light material and trousers of the same very long vests of a blue color broad brim straw Hats, white neck cloths and shoes and buckles.—

The Sisters had long dresses of a drab color with waists which came

nearly to their arm pits, close caps, or what the Scotch call “mutches” white handkerchiefs over the Shoulders, small white napkins hanging over the left wrist and high heeled shoes looking altogether quite antique.

In the Meeting House I counted about 32 Brothers and 35 Sisters which constituted one Family, there were about Sixty Visitors present from Albany and Troy who were seated on forms on one side of the Room the Brothers and Sisters also sat on Forms facing each other and between them an open space was left When all were assembled there was perfect silence for some minutes during which the Strangers gazed upon the Shakers with great interest, some seemed inclined to be merry and others to be serious—after the pause one of the elders came forward to the open space and addressed the Meeting something after the following style”

“We are called Shakers—Yes!—We are called Shakers.—and we are Shakers inasmuch that we would shake the World to get rid of sin— then all need shaking— we must take up the daily Cross and deny ourselves—Yes! We believe in taking up the daily Cross—we believe that we must deny ourselves— that the lust of the flesh is the greatest Sin— we must take up the daily Cross—each one—that alone leads to salvation” so he continued in broken sentences for a few minutes and then retired, and as if by an invisible signal the Brothers and Sisters commenced singing and really I must say I thought it most hideous— I never heard such bad singing in all my life— and I do not think that any of those Travellers who have visited and written regarding them have noticed the one marked peculiarity in their singing which is this:—they all sing the same part (both male and female) there is no tenor; no bass, no alto so I will leave my readers to judge of the music they make when I tell them that—

Each member sung as loud as he or she possibly could— they kept good time but their voices being so loud coarse and nasal really frightened the Children of the Strangers present; and those of the Visitors who were at first disposed to be merry, soon changed, to have mixed feelings of pity, wonder and contempt.— They sung a long time; I believe about three Hymns were joined into one, for no sooner was one ended than another was commenced, they did not leave off between the Verses but filled up the time by dwelling on the last note of the one Verse and blending it into the first note of the next, with such articulations as hee! hee! hee!—ho! ho! ho! or upon the syllables forming part of the last word of the Verse— and if it was the word Trumpet they would imitate a Trumpet or such a word as up, they would rise er! er! er!—up.—After singing the first part the Elder

Spoke again in a similar strain as before after which we had more singing then they all rose up and removed the forms upon which they had been sitting, to the Wall, and piled them up, leaving the Floor clear, they then formed themselves (men and women apart) into two Lines— two deep, the head of each line commencing with the biggest and oldest and dwindling gradually to the youngest and least, two Men and two Women stood in the centre of the room and the two lines formed an Oval around them the Sisters formed the inner oval and the Brothers the outer, the Sisters facing opposite ways to the Brothers— After standing this way for a minute or two, one of the Elders in the centre commenced a hymn and was speedily joined by the other Sisters and Brothers at the same time they moved their hands to and fro with a wavy motion keeping time to the tune—At a certain Signal the Members in the Ovals commenced marching, the Sisters in one direction and the Brothers in the other and each one from the oldest to the youngest waived their hands to the tune in the same manner as the singers did—This was a very interesting and curious sight and I feel certain that many Strangers who were present felt like myself viz at first disposed to laugh at the scene as being ridiculous and [blank] but soon changing to feel astonishment, and pity— it was pretty to see them go round reverse ways, it had a good effect and as they passed I had an opportunity of examining their countenances, the Women looked pale thin and sickly though their dress had a tendency to make them look worse than they otherwise would—they looked very plain the elder ones especially appeared as if they recently had given up the world and the flesh forever whilst the younger ones looked simple and submissive two or three of the young women appeared a little afraid and almost idiotic in looks whilst the two or three female Children seemed as though their mirthfulness had entirely departed or had never appeared.

The Brothers nearly all looked stout and healthy the elderly men, especially I thought looked remarkably well— The young Men did not look so well some of them also appeared idiotic and the little boys looked quite simple, the dresses of the latter were cut in precisely the same style as the Mens and looked very comical on such little fellows, their hair also was in Shaker fashion viz short in front with long locks hanging gracefully down the back of the neck.— After the march a pause ensued and the Members commenced moving at a brisker pace and shuffling their feet as if dancing, this they continued for some time and then the meeting broke up.—

The Hymns and Songs seemed to be chiefly relating to Ann Lee the word Mother and Mother Ann being frequently used.—

My visit, to this Community was unproductive in gaining information through its being Sunday and through an accident which unfortunately befel me a few minutes after leaving the Meeting. While riding along the road and noticing the Buildings the Carriage was upset and my Collar Bone was broken leaving a lasting impression of my visit to Watervliet.

Watervliet four families 80 persons in all 2000 acres of land