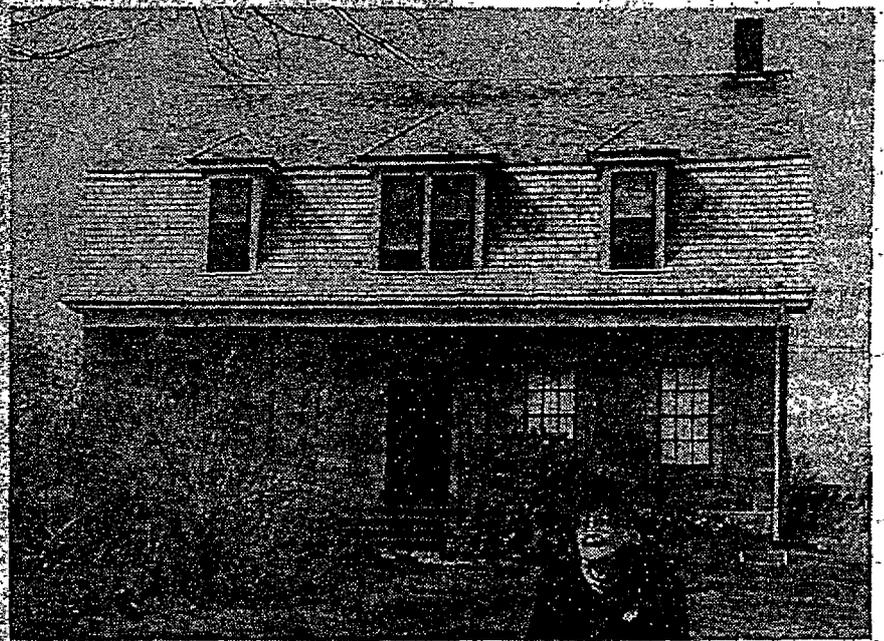


# Profile



Emma MacCulish, historic McCulloch House overlooking Pictou Harbour... "It was really a farm when we bought it." Steve Harder

## The ultimate caretaker

By Steve Harder

**W**HEN AMUSED, Emma MacCulish cups her hands, covers her mouth, and giggles. Much like a schoolgirl. Not at all like a 94-year-old woman who continues to take an active interest in the building and surroundings of the most famous historical house in northern Nova Scotia. For more than 50 years, the names McCulloch House and Emma MacCulish have been intertwined. As much as anyone can, the tiny, silver-haired woman with the charmingly girlish laugh gives the house life.

McCulloch House was built in 1806 for Thomas McCulloch, a Scottish minister who had a major impact on the development of Nova Scotia's educational system. Upset

by the lack of education and religion he encountered, he founded the Pictou Academy, a non-sectarian college, in 1816. In 1838, he became the first president of Dalhousie College in Halifax. He held the post until his death in 1848. McCulloch is often regarded as the father of

the house's present condition goes to Murdock and Emma MacCulish, who purchased the property in 1934. Until then, the house had changed owners on a fairly regular basis since 1891, when heirs of Thomas McCulloch sold the property to William Edward MacCulish. In 1900,

the house was sold to Annie and Edward Armstrong, who sold it in 1908 to Rev. James Fraser. His heirs sold the property to Robert H. Pope in 1920, who in turn sold it to the MacCulishes. During all these exchanges, the selling price was usually between \$2,600 and \$3,500.

Much of the credit for the

Emma and Murdock MacCulish were married in 1914. She was originally from Pictou County, while her husband was from Boston. He worked for an engineering company and the family lived "all over" the New England states. "We got tired of drifting," recalls Mrs. MacCulish. "We had two small children and had just lived in a trunk real-

### Only through the efforts of Emma MacCulish and her husband does MacCulloch House stand

liberalized education in Nova Scotia. The tangible monument to his memory continues to be McCulloch House, which is now an historic property owned by the province. Built of bricks from Scotland, the original house had a gable roof and

So they returned to Pictou and began looking for a house. They came upon Sherbrooke Cottage, which was McCulloch's name for the house in tribute to Nova Scotia's first premier, John Sherbrooke, who had supported the 1868

the 1868

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cept of the Pictou Academy. But the former name had long ago been forgotten. "The place was for sale," says Mrs. MacCulish. "It was a mess — the cellar was mud. The furnace was in pieces. It was sad."

Yet, perched on a knoll overlooking the harbour, the MacCulishes realized the seven-acre property had potential. "It was really a farm when we bought it," says Mrs. MacCulish. There were apple trees and grapes. Then, too, despite some neglect, she recalls "it was wonderful that all the owners took care of the woodwork."

Her husband, who was a mason and carpenter, began restoring the house. "We did most of the work," says Mrs. MacCulish. That took over the years. You're never through doing it. The couple's efforts were recognized in 1983 by the Hector Centre Trust, which administers the house on behalf of the Nova Scotia Museum. A plaque was presented containing the following inscription: "To Mr. and Mrs. Murdoch MacCulish. Only through their efforts does this house stand."

Only through their efforts did the historical significance of the house come to light. There was little interest in Thomas McCulloch or his original home when the MacCulishes first purchased the property. "He (McCulloch) was a forgotten man," says Mrs. MacCulish. She gives most of the credit for renewed interest in the house to three men — her husband, Pictou historical writer Roland H. Sherwood, and the late George McLaren, a Pictou native who was a senior official of the Nova Scotia Museum in Halifax.

Prior to his death in 1968, Mr. MacCulish had numerous discussions with Mr. Sherwood about the historical importance of the house. "It started, I think, in looking at the bricks in the house," says Mr. Sherwood. He says the roughness indicated the bricks were made locally. (This contradicts the more common opinion the bricks were imported from Scotland.)

Research into the origin of the bricks led to other discoveries. "We just got to know he (McCulloch) lived there," says Mr. Sherwood. "It was at that time we began to realize that here was a man who should be remembered. It began to sink into my head that this was an historic house."

In the face of general apathy from most of the town, Mr. Sherwood and Mr. MacCulish had a mission. "We just had a common theme — this was where McCulloch lived and this was important to the town," says Mr. Sherwood. "I think the idea of a museum came through the government somewhere."

The government link was probably Mr. McLaren. He boosted it, too, says Mrs. MacCulish. Also involved in the project was J. Lynton Martin, who was director of the Nova Scotia Museum in the early 1970s when the decision was made to purchase the house as an historical property. "I think we were always interested in the McCulloch House," says Mr. Martin, who retired three years ago. In a telephone interview from Greenfield,



► The 94-year-old resident ... A constant watchful eye.

Queens County, "I'm not really sure what started it. It seems to me it came from Mrs. MacCulish herself."

Mrs. MacCulish defers to her late husband. "Murdoch always spoke of selling it as a museum," she says. So she resisted several offers to sell the house privately, and instead offered it to the province to

### "It's our purpose as a trust to ensure she is happy in her home"

be maintained as a museum. "I sold it very reasonably," says Mrs. MacCulish. Mr. Martin confirms that she could have sold the property for two or three times as much money in a private sale. The house and adjoining land was purchased by the province in 1973, and the following year it was opened to the public as an historic house.

One unusual twist occurred as Mrs. MacCulish was preparing to leave the house and search for different accommodation. Officials of the Nova Scotia Museum didn't want her to go. "George (McLaren) says, 'All the moving you'll do is upstairs,'" recalls Mrs. MacCulish, still moved by the gesture. Mr. Martin explains why Mrs.

MacCulish was asked to stay. "I felt she was doing the province a great service in selling the house for what she did. I felt this was a terrific spirit, and I felt if she wanted to remain in the house as long as she liked, that would be all right."

For the past 19 years, Mrs. MacCulish has lived in the upper part of the house. The first floor contains a museum and public archives. The house is open to the public five months a year, from mid-May to mid-October. In 1984, more than 4,500 people visited. "As a rule they're very nice and interesting," says Mrs. MacCulish. "One lady from California, she even kissed me when she came."

Part of the attraction is Mrs. MacCulish, whose spirit pervades long the house and grounds. On fine days, she can usually be found gardening. When it's inclement, she sometimes sits by her window, looking out to the detail of how it was and how it sea. She is aware of everything that happens within her domain. Mrs. MacCulish is the voice of Mc-

drainage spouts to shrubs, interests her. She is the ultimate caretaker. "I'm genuinely struck by the sense of dedication she has to the house," says David Angus, who has been curator of the Hector Centre since spring, "and I think that colours her every living day."

When it comes to the house and grounds, Mrs. MacCulish can be uncompromising. She regularly calls museum officials in Halifax to ensure required work is being done. Having lived there for 64 years, she believes she best understands the house's needs. Mr. Angus agrees. "She keeps a constant watchful eye, from top to bottom, from basement to attic, and I think that's great," he says.

The president of the Hector Centre Trust, Alex Hardy, concurs. "We really appreciate her being there and taking such an active role in the operation of the trust and the house," Mr. Hardy says the trust recognizes the contribution made by Mrs. MacCulish in selling her home to the province. "Members of the trust realize a great obligation to Mrs. MacCulish," he says. "We're trying to reciprocate some of the things she provided the trust. It's our purpose as a trust to ensure she is happy in her home."

Though McCulloch House is officially an historic house, it is indeed the home of Mrs. MacCulish. "I have it for my life. It's right in my papers," she says. "We've taken care of it for so long, it has a lot of memories."

Mrs. MacCulish has lived in McCulloch House longer than anyone else — longer than Thomas McCulloch himself. It is the house, as opposed to the memory of the man, which seems to hold her. She knows each room intimately. She and the house have become as one. "I think it keeps her alive," says Mr. Angus, trying to explain her marvellous ability. "I've never known anyone as old and as spry."

Mr. Sherwood, who is in his 80s, is equally impressed. "Her ability to get around and remember things at her age is amazing to me. Her too, points to the house as a source of inspiration. "It isn't that she just lives there. The whole place is her home. Once she got there, that was her home and her family grew up there."

The memories linger, as do the worries about what will happen when she is gone. "In my papers, this is spoken of as the caretaker's apartment. Does this mean there will always be a caretaker?"

The house is like a child. "I would like to see a middle-aged man and woman as a caretaker," she says finally, hoping for the best, though still uncertain. "I don't know who you'd get today. They wouldn't have the interest."

Not like her. Not like Emma. "I often wonder how long I will stay. It's hard to know." The talk changes. Another story is recalled. The laugh re-denning. When it's inclement, she turns. The year is again 1934. The house stands as it did then. Every nook and cranny is recalled. The detail of how it was and how it happens within her domain. Mrs. MacCulish is the voice of McCulloch House, its spirit, its soul.