

Report on the October 11, 2016 Ranald MacDonald Award

On October 11, 2016, the first Ranald MacDonald Award ceremony was held on board the beautiful three-masted sailing ship, *De Nieuwe Liefde*, or “*New Love*,” anchored at harbor in Amsterdam. The sun came out just in time, and the setting evoked images of young Ranald on a whaling ship bound for the Japan Sea in 1848. The award, established by the non-profit culture organization known as the *Friends of MacDonald • The Dutch Connection*, is to be granted annually to the “work of a debut writer or artist which is exceptionally ‘true, good and beautiful’ and sheds new light on the relations between Asia, Europe and North America.”ⁱ

The award winner this year was the hauntingly beautiful and intellectually intricate novel, *In the Light of What We Know* (Picador, 2015) by Zia Haider Rahman, who travelled to attend the ceremony from London. His book is powerful, with a new and global perspective, delivered in a near stream-of-conscious style, about some of the underlying psychological and political pathologies affecting us all in the 21st century. He is a man with a humbling degree of experience and knowledge, but in person very approachable, entertaining, and witty. As the author of *Native American in the Land of the Shogun: Ranald MacDonald and the Opening of Japan* (Stone Bridge Press, 2003), Yours Truly was honored to attend from San Francisco, and receive a special “Lifetime Achievement” award for my “oeuvre” of work, but it was also an privilege simply to share the occasion with Zia.

For me, the award was also the chance of a lifetime to visit Amsterdam and to see what Fred Dijs has put together in honor of our mutual hero, Ranald. Fred Dijs and I share the same first name, “Frederik” (spelled without a “c”), and we also share an obsession with Ranald’s story. Several years ago Fred sailed from the Netherlands by cargo ship to North America, and after touring the various Ranald-related sites in today’s Canada and the United States, he sailed again on a cargo ship from San Francisco to Japan—where he visited almost all the Ranald-related sites (including Rishiri and even Yagishiri islands). After returning to the Netherlands he formed *Friends of MacDonald • The Dutch Connection* (abbreviated as FOM NL). The current president is Ernst Homburg, the treasurer is Frits van der Kooy, and Fred Dijs serves as secretary. The latter part of the organization’s name, according to Fred, was inspired by a pun that one of the U.S. FOM founders, Bruce Berney, once made, referring to the title of a famous Hollywood movie with the name of another, nearby European country in it. The Ranald MacDonald Award, started in 2016, includes a generous monetary prize as well as a trophy. It is made possible by the legacy of Fred’s father, Dr. T. Dijs (1923-1999), an international businessman who also had a great love for both Asia and North America.

The ceremony was held below decks on *De Nieuwe Liefde*, attended by the principals of FOM NL, as well as about thirty esteemed guests. Fritz gave the

introductory remarks, and Fred Dijs then introduced the winners and presented them with trophies. They are differentiated mainly by the color and type of wood used, but share a beautiful and extraordinarily creative design by Josje-Marie Vrolijk, implemented in three dimensions digitally by Rein Aardse, a self-proclaimed “laser master.” Inside a square paper box, with an image of Ranald MacDonald on the lid, is a small wooden cylinder; the top of the wooden cylinder has the same image of Ranald as on the top of the box, but it is laser-etched. When gently twisted, the top half can be removed, revealing a wooden globe of Earth that sits inside the bottom half. The top and bottom of the cylinder, and the globe, are from three different kinds of wood, from three different continents. The globe, which can be removed, shows the continents and oceans, with tiny metal studs indicating places of relevance to Ranald’s story. A tiny magnet built into the bottom of the globe keeps Earth always resting in a North-South, upright orientation. Underneath the globe in the bottom half of the cylinder, there is a beautifully printed circle of paper which, when removed and unfolded, forms four connected circles, each inscribed in gold with words from the FOM Committee describing the award. I did not have a chance to read Zia Haider Rahman’s inscription, but mine reads as follows:

2016
Ranald MacDonald Prize
Oeuvre
Frederik L. Schodt

“The board of *Friends of MacDonald: The Dutch Connection* are honored to award in 2016 a special Ranald MacDonald Prize to Frederik Schodt for his entire work. His oeuvre is exceptionally “true, good, and beautiful,” and has shed new light on the relationship between Asia, Europe and North America. As such, it perfectly corresponds to the statutes of the foundation. [Signed] Ernst Homburg—president; Fred Dijs—secretary; Fritz van der Kooy—treasurer.”

After presentation of the awards, we were serenaded on shipboard by Laurens Moreno Sanchez on a viola, who wove Chinook, European, and Chinese musical themes into a physically roving and emotionally moving performance. When the ceremonies were over, we went up on deck and found that an Amsterdam canal boat had pulled alongside *De Nieuwe Liefde*. This was another treat, provided to Zia, myself, and about twelve other special guests. The boat was a deluxe 1910 classic, all-wood except for the steel hull, but equipped with an ultra-modern, nearly-silent electric engine—and for the next couple of hours we sailed through a maze of canals, under bridges and past houses built in the 1600s and 1700s, watching as the sun set and the street and house lights slowly winked on. While sailing, we had a multi-course gourmet meal specially prepared by Remco Tensen, a world-class chef from the canal-side, top-ranked restaurant, *Breitner*. The food, again representing cuisine of Europe, Asia, and North America, was served on linen-covered tables, and enjoyed by our little group both for its flavors and exotic presentation. All-in-all, it was a dream-like day, something I will never forget.

My wife, Fiammetta, and I stayed nearly a week in Amsterdam, in the loft-garret of a 17th century merchant house, now a bed-and-breakfast called *The Vanguard*, run by the hospitable and highly capable Cynthia Mertens. We were right by the canals, and able to explore this compact and highly walkable city, its central area little changed from centuries ago; it was easy to image Rembrandt and other long-gone artists strolling by in the area. Fred Dijs somehow also found the time in his busy schedule to show us Utrecht and Leiden, as well as the former Zuiderzee area. Leiden, in particular, was fascinating because of the National Museum of Ethnology. It has a marvelous collection of Japanese artifacts sent or brought back from Japan by the Dutch, during their long sojourn on Dejima, the man-made island in Nagasaki Bay where the Dutch were the only Europeans allowed to conduct limited trade during Japan's over two hundred year period of Seclusion (approx. 1639-1854). Also, in Leiden, we toured the Siebold House, where Philipp Franz von Siebold lived, and where some of his Japan collection is housed. Siebold was a German physician who masqueraded as Dutch to be able to travel to Japan and live on Dejima from 1823 to 1830. He was eventually deported from Japan for illegally shipping maps out of the country, but he is today the great subject of great academic and popular fascination in Japan. His doomed love affair with a Japanese courtesan resulted in a child who later became Japan's first female physician. But above all else, he is a major historical figure in the early transmission of knowledge about Japan (and particularly its flora and fauna), to Europe.

Which brings us back to Ranald MacDonald and the "Dutch connection." Some who are not so familiar with Ranald's story may in fact wonder what connection he actually had to the Netherlands. While it is entirely possible that Ranald visited Holland at some point in his life, there are no surviving records indicating this. He did, however, incur a considerable obligation to the Dutch while imprisoned in Nagasaki.

Since the Dutch were the only European traders allowed on Japanese soil for over two hundred years, they also provided the conduit for most Western knowledge about Japan and, conversely, most Japanese knowledge about the West. Furthermore, when European and American sailors were occasionally shipwrecked or washed up on Japanese shores, they were usually captured and sent to Nagasaki, where they were interrogated and from where they were eventually deported. And in Nagasaki, the Japanese usually had to rely on the help of the Dutch, both for interpreting during interrogations and for an annual ship to take the sailors away.

While confined in Nagasaki, Ranald made a huge contribution to Japan by teaching English to several professional Japanese interpreters, who up until that point knew only Dutch and Chinese. But before that, when he himself was initially interrogated, someone who could speak English had to be found to help the Japanese interpreters, and that was a Dutchman with a good grasp of English. Records show that when

Ranald was formally interrogated in Nagasaki, he was assisted by Joseph Levyssohn, the Dutch superintendent for trade then stationed trader at Dejima. Levyssohn was thus the linguistic link between the Japanese government officials, their professional interpreters (who knew only Dutch), and Ranald. In other words, the officials would ask questions in Japanese, the interpreters would interpret this into Dutch, and Levyssohn would translate the Dutch into English for Ranald. Ranald's replies would conversely be written down by Levyssohn into Dutch, which the Japanese interpreters would then render into Japanese for the officials.

From the English and Japanese records that survive, it is clear that Ranald was assisted by Levyssohn in many ways. For example, Levyssohn probably massaged some of Ranald's answers, to steer him clear of statements that would have alarmed the Japanese, who feared that he was either a missionary or a spy. And we know for a fact that Levyssohn befriended Ranald, who was kept in a type of isolation, in his jail. On European New Year's Day, Levyssohn obtained special permission from the Japanese magistrate, and in his own journal entry describes delivering coffee, sugar, butter, cigars, and four loaves of bread to him.ⁱⁱ Ranald, in his writings, describes receiving a "bottle of exquisite Coffee" and "more precious still to me—sixty-eight numbers of the *London Atlas* newspaper, and *Weekly Dispatch*, the whole with his polite card of compliments."ⁱⁱⁱ Levyssohn also apparently tried to deliver Ranald some alcohol, with permission, and he may have been worried about MacDonald's staying warm, as it was very cold. But Ranald was a teetotaler, and Levyssohn notes that he declined "to take wine or liquors."^{iv}

Other American sailors who were imprisoned in Nagasaki at the same time as Ranald were treated much rougher than he was. Some deserters from the *Lagoda*, a U.S. whaling ship, were probably a much rougher bunch, and two of them even died in captivity. Later, Levyssohn would write that it "was only thanks to [Ranald MacDonald's] good behavior, his decent manners and the fact that he was teaching English to some of the Dutch interpreters that he, in return, was treated politely and well."^v Ranald probably would have been deported from Japan at some point on an annual Dutch ship, but he might have been kept considerably longer, especially when the Japanese later realized his value as an English teacher. It was really due to Levyssohn and the Dutch that he was able to leave in the spring of 1849, after only half a year of confinement.

Word of the presence of imprisoned U.S. sailors, and a pleading note from them, was sent via Levyssohn, at considerable personal risk, to the U.S. consul in the Dutch East Indies headquarters in Batavia (Jakarta, in today's Indonesia) in November 1848. From there the information was relayed to the U.S. Navy (in Hong Kong). On April 18, 1849, the U.S.S. *Preble* thus finally arrived in Nagasaki Bay demanding return of the imprisoned U.S. sailors. The captain of the *Preble* was not entirely sure of Ranald's presence, since Ranald was kept isolated from the other sailors (who knew nothing of MacDonald), and he was of blurred nationality,

described in Japanese interrogation records as merely being from “Canada” or “Oregon” (jointly controlled by both British and Americans when he was born). The Japanese officials in effect therefore released Ranald to the American Navy as a type of “bonus.”

This was all done with the aid of Levyssohn, who knew the constraints that both the U.S. Navy and the tradition and bureaucracy-bound Japanese officials had to operate under. Under Japanese law, foreigners technically could only be deported on either Dutch or Chinese ships, so after a dangerous impasse in negotiations, Levyssohn helped arrange the transfer of the prisoners in a way that could satisfy everyone—he had them first transferred to the more neutral Dutch territory on tiny Dejima.^{vi}

Because of Levyssohn, accounts of Ranald’s imprisonment in Japan also appeared in Dutch newspapers in Rotterdam and Amsterdam in March 23-24, 1849, many months before any mention in the English-speaking world, and nearly one month before the U.S.S. *Preble* arrived in Nagasaki. These reports, which traveled an extraordinary distance in what was then rapid time, were based on the messages Levyssohn had sent to Batavia in November, the previous year. From the Dutch papers, we can tell that MacDonald had told his Japanese interrogators that he had a disagreement with his captain and left the ship in a boat intending to go to China, and only accidentally wound up on Rishiri Island, off of in northern Hokkaido. We can also see that the Japanese, according to Levyssohn, indeed suspected that he might be a spy or a missionary.^{vii}

Ranald was forever grateful to Levyssohn, and to the Dutch physician on Dejima who looked after him during his incarceration. As he writes in a section titled “Dutch Friends” in his posthumously published *Narrative*,

“Whatever influence a European resident might have had with the Government I don't know. It was evident to me in my case, that that influence was given in my favor, for I have the assurance of Mr. John Livessohn, the Dutch Chief Factor resident at the time at the Port (Nagasaki), that they would give me a passage in the next annual ship, subject of course to permission from the authorities of Japan. He, as stated in my narrative, was ever most kindly attentive to me in the way of relieving the monotony and wants of my foreign confinement. I can say the same of the good Doctor (Dutch also) of the Establishment. They were all good and clever: and we all esteemed each other.”^{viii}

As for me, I will always feel grateful to *Friends of MacDonald • The Dutch Connection*, and to Fred Dijs, in particular, for the kindness and hospitality shown to me and my wife. But throughout our stay in Amsterdam, I also kept thinking about Ranald. I am sure that he would have been thrilled to see, after so many

years, that his remarkable achievements are being celebrated today in such a wonderful manner, in Holland, so far from both Japan and his native land.

Frederik L. Schodt
November 2, 2016
San Francisco, California

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- ⁱ Fred Dijs, "PRESS RELEASE: Zia Haider Rahman first ever winner of the international Ranald MacDonald Prize for his novel *In het licht van wat wij weten*. Frederik Schodt receives lifetime achievement award," accessed November 2, 2016, <http://www.friendsofmacdonald.nl/en/2016/09/press-release/>
- ⁱⁱ J.H. Levissohn entry in *Dag Register*, 1 January 1849.
- ⁱⁱⁱ William Lewis and Naojirō Murakami, eds., *Ranald MacDonald: The Narrative of his early life on the Columbia under the Hudson's Bay Company's regime; of his experience in the Pacific Whale Fishery; and of his great Adventure to Japan; with a sketch of his later life on the Western Frontier, 1824-1894*, (Spokane, Washington: Eastern Washington State Historical Society, 1923), pp. 233, 243.
- ^{iv} J. H. Levissohn, *Bladen over Japan*, (The Hague: Belinfante Brothers, 1852), pp. 53–56.
- ^v *Ibid.*, pp. 53.
- ^{vi} For a fuller account of all this, see Frederik L. Schodt's *Native American in the Land of the Shogun: Ranald MacDonald and the Opening of Japan* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), pp. 254-322.
- ^{vii} See *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche*, No. 71, March 23, 1849, p.1, and *Algemeen Handelsblad*, No. 5405, March 23, 1849, p. 2 (based on news from Batavia from January 28, 1849).
- ^{viii} Lewis and Murakami, ed., *Ranald MacDonald: The Narrative*, p. 264.