



*Duncan MacDonald photographed in Edinburgh*

# SCOTLAND'S FIRST LADY IN AMERICA

*Described as a national treasure, Texan born Miss Duncan MacDonald works energetically and enthusiastically for Scotland from her home on the island of Martha's Vineyard.*

*By Noel Young.*

A campaign to raise the image of Sir Walter Scott in America - and help with the restoration of his home at Abbotsford in the Scottish Borders - has at its heart a woman who over the years, say her friends, has become the Queen of Scottish-American relations - despite the fact that she was born in Texas.

A Scottish newspaper recently described Miss Duncan MacDonald as 'the first lady of Scotland in America.'

'And they're not far wrong,' says Alan Bain president emeritus of the American Scottish Foundation, himself one of the best-known American Scots.

'She is a national treasure, no question. The amount of energy, interest and enthusiasm she puts into her work for Scotland is extraordinary.'

As executive vice-president of the Caledonian Foundation USA, Duncan, from her home on the island of Martha's Vineyard, has brought together eight influential Scots-American organisations under the umbrella title of the Scottish Coalition.

Their latest enterprise: In December they jointly lent their support to the Sir Walter Scott project at a dinner in Washington.

Tartan Day is another institution where Duncan's hand can be seen. Although Canada gets the credit for founding Tartan Day in 1986, (the USA formally launched it in 1997) diaspora historians now believe an initiative of the American-Scottish Foundation in 1974 in which Duncan was involved - an action-packed Scotland Week in New York City - was the real catalyst for the US paying more attention to its Scots heritage.

Duncan - she called herself after her Scots grandfather because another girl at school had the same name as her, Dorothy - never intended to get into the diaspora business.

'I was working with a TV station in Manhattan, enjoying life, going to the theatre and the ballet.

'Then one day an executive in my office mentioned the American-Scottish Foundation and said the US-born president, Lady Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton could use some volunteer help. Would I be interested? So I took that on.

'My time with Lady Hamilton was very interesting. Natalie is a person to whom no one answers No. When she decided to honour Scotland through the efforts of ASF, there were flags along Fifth Avenue from one end to the other.

'She wanted a number of celebrities to come over from Scotland for a conference, and she had planned a 'day' of events.

'When I saw the long list, I said, Lady Hamilton, this is ridiculous. Why don't you invite your guests for a WEEK rather than just for one day? And so that was decided. The press releases went out with the heading: SCOTLAND WEEK - NOVEMBER 10-17, 1974.'

Now thoroughly imbued with the Scotland bug, Duncan later leaped at the chance to become executive director of Scottish Heritage USA, an organisation whose main aim today is supporting the National Trust in Scotland.

When they moved their HQ to North Carolina, Duncan maintained her Scottish interest with the Caledonian Foundation USA., supporting Scottish Opera.



*Duncan MacDonald has been instrumental in working towards the restoration of Abbotsford, home of Sir Walter Scott*



*Miss MacDonald enjoying the sunshine in Martha's Vineyard*

Duncan's career spans more than 60 years. She is not giving away her age ('A lady doesn't tell,' she says) but the organisation American Women in Radio and Television says she has been a member since 1945.

Duncan explained how she got into TV, 'I was in New York studying. One day I went into an advertising office looking for work. They said. "Well there's this thing called television. If it ever gets off the ground, we'll call you.'

'So they did call. I started as a secretary at Dumont Television and then they decided they needed a producer. So I worked on the world's first daily soap opera. We had a script and I called the camera shots.'

Later Duncan moved on to become a radio interviewer, with a major New York station. She did everything: finding the guests, organising the publicity, and writing the thank-you notes.

She went to Scotland to carry out interviews in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow (one of her subjects was Sir Compton Mackenzie).

'I felt at home the moment I arrived there,' said Duncan.

For three years Duncan was the executive director of the National Friends of Public Broadcasting, funded by the Carnegie Corporation to support PBS, the nearest thing America has to the BBC.

'I travelled across the country setting up 'friends' groups. It was that experience of building groups around the United States and getting them to be one large family, that inspired me with the Scottish Coalition.'

That was 14 years ago. Duncan said, "Until then all the Scottish American organisations were doing their own thing and going off in different directions. We had the same goal: to support Scotland. Yet we weren't even talking to each other .

'In 1997, the new coalition put its weight behind the efforts to get Tartan Day established in the US, as it already was in Canada.'

Asked how she finished up as a leader of the US Scots community, she quotes the answer that John Lindsay gave her on air when she asked how he became mayor of New York: 'I just put one foot in front of the other,' he said.

'Of all the things I have done, what I am most proud of is bringing the Scottish community together here in the US.' 🇬🇧

