

Remembered Light

A Talk for the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco

BY JAY TURNBULL, MARCH 11, 2025

I was fascinated by Malcolm Young’s lecture of February 11 in which he discussed architect/professor Christopher Alexander and theologian Jonathan Edwards, two thinkers separated by time, with Edwards in the 18th century and Alexander the 20th. Both men addressed what constituted art, harmony, even soul in what we compose or build, and how one approached the making of it. In this talk I’ll tell the story of Frederick McDonald, an Episcopal priest whose life spanned the 20th century and who, to me, personifies what the French architect LeCorbusier called the “patient search” of creating.

Early Days

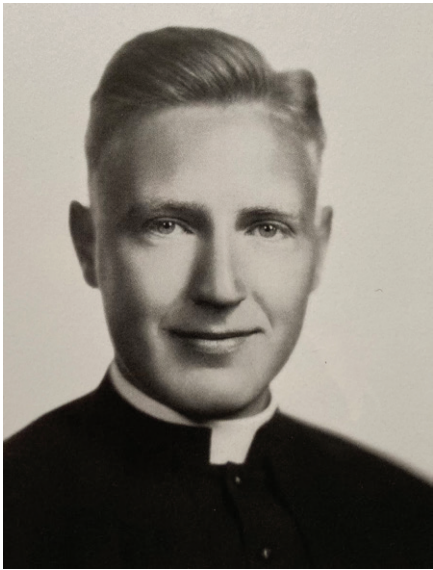
Fred, as he was known to friends (Uncle Wick to cousins) was born in 1908 and died in 2002. Cherished by a prominent Seattle family and accompanied by his younger sister Elizabeth, Fred had a fortunate childhood in Seattle as the city expanded in commerce and power.

He attended neighborhood schools, camps and cultural offerings. As a teenager he hiked much of the Pacific Northwest. Graduating from high school in 1926, he spent the summer on a steamship to Japan [all the while learning how to be an able seaman] and entered the University of Washington in the fall.

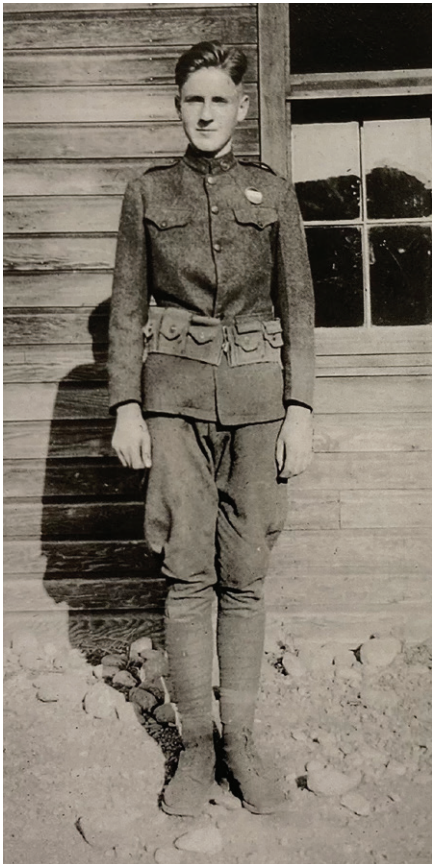
Undergraduate years to Fred were a mix of being bored with courses at the University and seeking adventure away from campus. During summers he worked on Pacific Ocean freighters and delighted in the ports he encountered. In college his first choice of major was pre-med — not a success! — which was followed by a slog through correspondence courses while satisfying his wanderlust. He became interested in preparing for the ministry, which meant that he should first receive an undergraduate degree and would seek discernment of his calling within his home parish, St. Paul’s in Seattle, teaching Sunday school, taking charge of the Young People’s Fellowship and singing in the choir. He completed his undergraduate courses by mid-1931.

Seminary

Fred wanted to take in as much as he could during a period when the world paused between cataclysmic wars. In the fall of 1931 he



Frederick McDonald as a young priest, 1954. Source: Autobiography.



Fred at 15, cadet in the National Guard. Source: Ibid.



Chapel, General Theological Seminary, New York. Source: Ibid.

began study at General Theological Seminary in New York City. As he was later to write, “The first loyalty of a Christian in terms of Church should surely be to Christendom but ... the special glory of [our] Seminary in New York was its acceptance of ... [the multiple denominations resulting from the Reformation] and having in its teaching ... scholars of recognized accomplishment.”

He plunged in. As to ministry, he was first assigned to a small class of what he called ‘ruffian youngsters’. He admits he liked the kids but never mastered the discipline. In summer he helped counsel 100 impoverished children at a camp in the Catskills. He attended church conventions, tried monastic life, traveled again to Europe where he was initially impressed by the politics and deeds of Adolf Hitler - and was later abashed to reconsider.

Finally, he neared graduation from Seminary and found himself ‘on the surface... moving most favorably; but inwardly ... deeply, emotionally distressed.’ So much so that he left the seminary a few days before the graduation ceremonies, but he said, ‘not before I had presided at our class banquet ...’

Ministry

Fred returned to the Diocese of Olympia and was asked by the bishop to become a ‘mission priest,’ which meant that he would divide his time (and salary) between more than one congregation. He served St. John’s in Centralia, and bible schools in Westport, South Bend, and Hoquiam, all in Washington state.

His first experience in being rector of a more established church was in St. David’s, Portland. It was there that he began his work in August of 1939, just two weeks before World War II began. And it was from there that he volunteered for Chaplain service in both the U.S. Navy and Army immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.



Father McDonald greeting parishioners at St. David’s, Portland. Source: Ibid.

War Service

It’s one thing to apply, but another to be ordered to duty, and Fred remained at St. David’s for more than a year before he was sent to Harvard to begin training as chaplain in late September of 1942. Training completed, he was stationed at the Chapel of the U.S. Army San Francisco Port of Embarkation in November. We know that site as Fort Mason.

Of course, McDonald had hoped to see something closer to the war than a post chapel in San Francisco, so he finally talked the port commander into allowing him just one cruise to the South Pacific. This he accomplished in mid-1943 when he was made chaplain on a ship, the S. S. Lew Wallace, that transported Army troops.

After several calls in the Pacific including Noumea, the S. S. Lew Wallace steamed north to Hawaii and thereafter to San Francisco. By this time D-Day had occurred and the intensity of the stateside war rose with it. Once Fred arrived in the U.S. he discovered orders directing him east for transport to Europe. Another part of his war began when he boarded ship to England in mid-1944.

England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, 1944-1945



Chaplain Frederick McDonald’s travel in Europe, 1944-45. Source: Exhibit catalog.



Coventry Cathedral, U.K. Ruins. Source: Historic England.

Once in England, McDonald visited Coventry Cathedral, which had been largely destroyed during the Battle of Britain and stood with only a few walls remaining, plus a charred cross. This sight became the subject of one of the works of art made, 60 years later, by artists engaged by Fred to help with crafting his personal legacy.

Shortly after visiting Coventry, McDonald was given urgent orders to an unnamed destination in France. He wrote later that his plane landed in a field near Bayeux and he was driven by jeep to a gate marked with a sign showing five asterisks. He discovered that this was the headquarters of the 12th Army Group, which was to be his duty station for the balance of the European war.

The Group, commanded by then-Lt. General Omar Bradley, landed in France on D-Day and moved with its Allies through northwestern Europe. McDonald



Chaplain McDonald, 1944



McDonald conducting outdoor service in the field. Sources: Autobiography.

was one of several special chaplains attached to the Group headquarters whose duties were pastoral, not administrative. Main headquarters of the Group, according to McDonald, were stationed first in Normandy, then near Paris after its liberation, in Verdun, in Luxembourg, and finally in Wiesbaden, where they were when war ended. Of course, the ‘Forward’ headquarters, consisting of Bradley and his immediate support, moved to temporary quarters whenever necessary and Fred was usually with that staff.



Shards gathered from ruins, 1944-45. Source: Exhibit catalog.

Shards

Ch. McDonald was assigned a jeep with driver, and one of his duties was surveying the destruction of churches, synagogues and other places of worship. Beginning in London he would pick up a few pieces of stained glass on the floor of a bombed-out structure and mail them home to Seattle. He ended up with a shoebox full of envelopes - and shards of colored glass.

It was in the 1990s in San Francisco that Fred, now living in The Sequoias, told his friends that he still had the shoebox under his bed. And that he had always hoped he could turn the contents into some kind of stained glass panel which could be installed in a church or chapel as a reminder and memorial of the War. But now, in his mid-eighties, he probably wouldn't get around to

it. This produced a chorus of advice that insisted “if not now, when?” and all present agreed that making a work of art containing glass that had survived for centuries was an opportunity that should not be lost.

Fred searched for a suitable artist who could help and advise him, and found Armelle Le Roux, born and educated in France, whose special talent was composing and mounting stained glass. She and Fred discussed the possibilities of the shards, and it was Armelle who suggested that, since the origin of most of the shards was known, individual works of art linked to where the glass had been found might be the best approach.

Thus were planned twenty-five pieces of stained glass art. Some were traditional stained glass panels; some were opaque or obscure; some were sculptural or 3-dimensional.

I will show examples of several of the finished works of art; together they are known informally as “The McDonald Windows” and they have acquired a life of their own, shipped around the U.S. and displayed at a dozen locations. Most recently they have been shown at the National World War II Museum, New Orleans; the Veterans Building, San Francisco Civic Center; the National Veterans Museum & Memorial, Columbus; and presently at the Pritzker Military Museum, Kenosha, WI.

But first I should tell you how the war ended for Fred. On May 8, 1945, V-E Day, he was asked by Bradley’s staff to speak at a service celebrating the victory. The proposed program, limited to 15 minutes in length and broadcast by NBC to the U.S., was to contain a hymn, lesson, prayers and McDonald’s address. Every word had to be written in advance and approved by censors. Though nervous and frightened Fred began,

Many centuries ago a prophet in Israel charged men with the duty of ‘Proclaiming liberty — every man to his neighbor.’ No text can be more appropriate to this Victory in Europe Day.

In the ages that lie between the sounding of Jeremiah’s message and this day, the human family has suffered many wars and oppressions. Too frequently, the close of the wars have themselves established the oppressions. It is not difficult for us to imagine how incredibly frightful would be this day had our enemies won this war — had they established their own ‘diktat’ peace, with its consequent Dachau, Buchenwald, and Nordhausen concentration camps in Connecticut, Kentucky, and California.

Thank God, the conflict ends with victory for the United Nations!

What a joy we can ‘proclaim’ this Victory Day. Certainly we have every right to hope that liberties for all people will grow from the multitude of sacrifices that have been made. May this new era be a period of realization of the prophet’s dream — when every man would proclaim liberty to his neighbor.

Reflective minds must watch with concern the course chosen by the delegates to the United Nations’ Conference in San Francisco. Here is the first step toward building victory into durable peace. Will we find in the world of tomorrow an international outlook with the breadth of vision and freedom that has characterized our country’s growth? If not, we may find a world bearing more resemblance to Alcatraz — the prison-rock in San Francisco harbor. Yet the thoughtful mind remembers that that is a choice with which we are always faced, if we are free to choose.

Victory has brought us freedom of choice, and given the people of the earth real hope. Truly that is cause for celebration.

Days of war are hard times and breed many griefs. They are, too, times of testing and development of character. The reward that remains, however, is the peace. Surely today we may exchange for the spirit of heaviness the garment of joyful praise!

McDonald’s homily of about 500 words, based on a text from Jeremiah, was included in General Bradley’s memoir, and is given in the printed version of this talk.

Aftermath

After V-E Day, McDonald was first transferred to General Eisenhower’s headquarters in Frankfurt. There, messengers were searching for him to continue to Biarritz and serve on the faculty of Biarritz Army University, one of four similar institutions set up to occupy the time of servicemen awaiting transit back to the U.S.



Chaplain McDonald as faculty member, Armed Forces University, Biarritz.
Source: Autobiography.

McDonald was astounded by the application and curiosity of the former soldiers, who typically attended eight-week courses as they waited for orders home. The 280-person faculty was drawn from suitable Army candidates with academic backgrounds. The Biarritz institution lasted for eight months.

Fred traveled home in 1946, aged 38. His later career included posts in Cambridge, Jerusalem and Fiji; he was rector of St. Clement’s in Honolulu and later headmaster of the Iolani School. He spent time as administrator of missions in Europe and central Africa, and in his final assignment was an assisting priest at St. Luke’s Church in San Francisco.

Selected Works from the McDonald Windows



The Glass Book, site unknown. Artists: Armelle Le Roux, Robert. Shank. Number of shards: 1. 14" x 9".
The one shard, rectangular like a tile, has never been identified. At right, artist Armelle Le Roux. Sources: Exhibit catalog.

Ch. Frederick McDonald's comments:
We see a door and within its frame, we discern a shadowy figure seeking to come through.
Why is he emerging?
Does he have a message for us?
Can he in any way clarify the bafflement we feel for that great irrationality we call War?



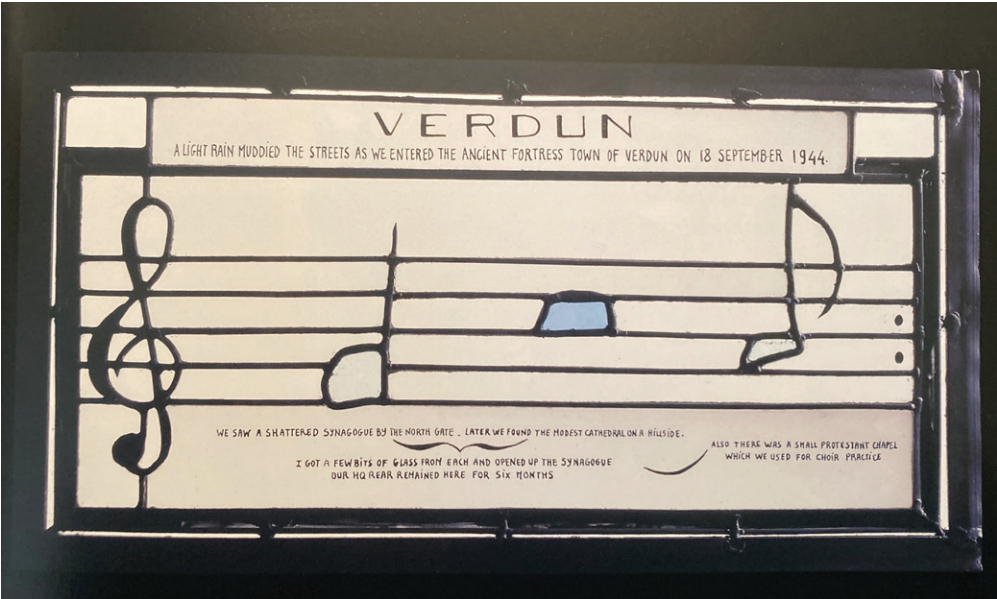
St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry, England.
Artist: Armelle Le Roux.
Number of shards: 10. 18- 5/4" x 55-5/4".

Ch. McDonald:
The first target of the Luftwaffe's Baedeker raids in the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, this ancient Cathedral was visited by a number of chaplains after their arrival from New York in 1944. Totally destroyed, the ruins became an anteroom for entrance into the new Cathedral built in the 1950s, a moving illustration of England's rise after the war to newness of life.



Cathedral de Notre Dame, Coutances, France.
Artist: Irnigard Steding.
Number of shards: 9. 12" x 24". Sources: Ibid.

Ch. McDonald:
The Cathedral of Notre Dame in Coutances was the first great Gothic church we saw in our army advance. It was famous for the 'dim religious light' of its sparkling windows. Blasting bombs had shattered every one, and the interior was bright under the August sun. This made the architectural excellence more plainly seen since it was first built 700 years ago.



Synagogue, Protestant Church, Roman Catholic Cathedral. Verdun, France.
Artist: Armelle Le Roux. Number of shards: 5. 50-5/4" x 11". Source: Ibid.

Ch. McDonald:
A light rain muddled the streets as we entered the ancient fortress town of Verdun. We saw a shattered synagogue by the north gate. Later we found a modest cathedral on a hillside. I got a few pieces of glass from each. The synagogue was opened up and our rear headquarters remained there for six months. There was also a small Protestant chapel that we used for choir practice.



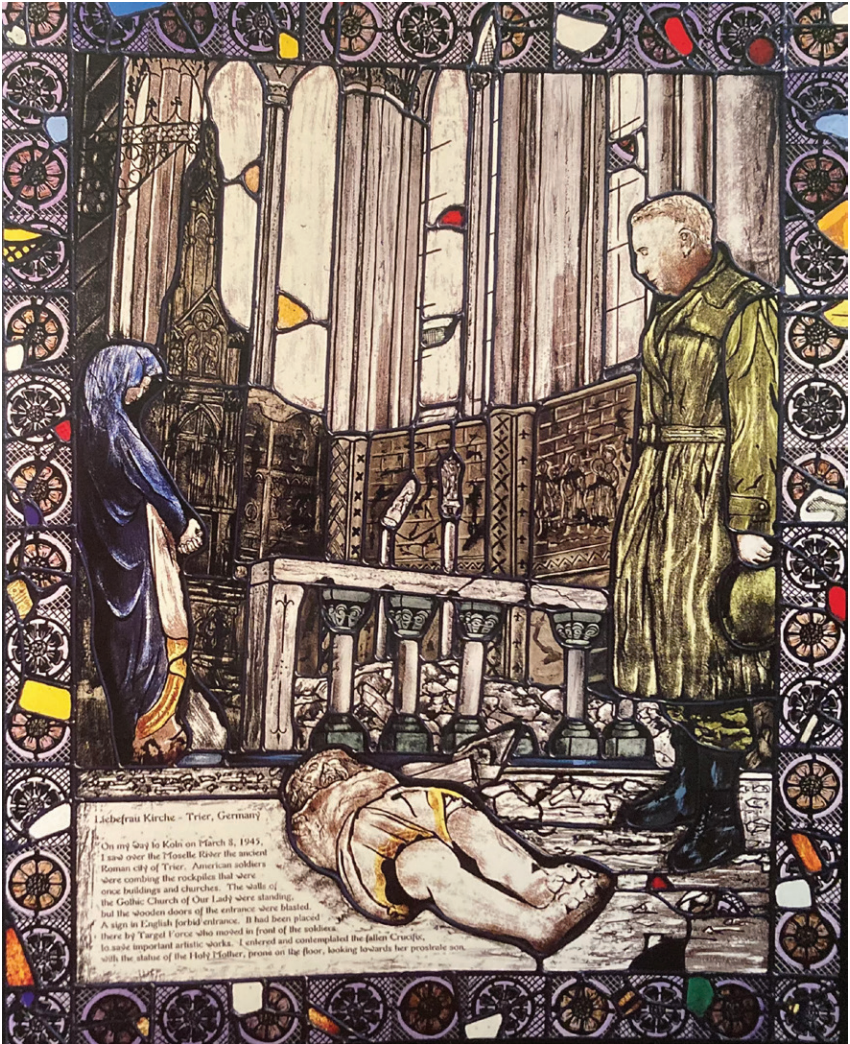
Cathedral of St. Stephen, Metz, France. Artist: Narcissus Quagliata.
Number of shards: 55. 29-5/4" x 41". Source: Ibid.

Ch. McDonald:
In the town I visited the Cathedral of St. Stephen, built in the 14th to 16th centuries, whose glass was very much admired. We were cautious because of the guns and because the Germans owned the province from 1870 to 1920, and there were many Nazi sympathizers. It was a cold, gray day.



Unidentified Sanctuaries, Malmedy, Belgium. Artist: Danial Ziegler.
Number of shards: 7. 24" x 17-1/4" x 10-1/2". Source: Ibid.

Ch. McDonald:
Returning from Aachen I drove through Malmedy in eastern Belgium, an area that Hitler's Reich had early claimed. [I had] a road map outlined for me by our planning section ... Looking down on the valley near Monschau I saw a pillbox surmounted by a wind blown Nazi flag. On the advice of an artillery officer I altered my return route. If I had continued I would have run right into German forces.



Church of our Lady, Trier, Germany, Artist: Peter Eichhorn.
Number of shards: 45. 56" x 44-1/4". Source: Ibid.

Ch. McDonald:
This church with its striking cupola is on the east bank of the Meuse River. It had been easily overrun in 1940, but was not quite reached by the Germans in 1944, when I picked up these slivers of glass. [Smaller image is by Army photographers. Colored glass panel is by the artist.]





St. Andrews English Church, Biarritz, France. Artist: Constance Levathes. Number of shards: 4. 8-1/4" x 14" x 5".

Ch. McDonald:

The Army University was temporarily set up in Biarritz to further the education of soldiers waiting transportation home. They could not use the church, which was restored after the war, but used the Casino Theater instead. [This 5-dimensional work had an opening on one side where a slip of paper could be left, honoring a soldier or loved one.]

A Home for the Windows

One of Fred's last concerns was to find a place where the Windows he had helped to create could be housed. On a visit to the Presidio of San Francisco with Paul Chaffee, minister at the main Presidio Chapel and a representative of the interfaith community, Fred found a potential home. Happily, our firm, Page & Turnbull, was already at work doing a feasibility study for providing accessibility to that building, and we continued as architects.

McDonald hoped a special gallery could also be built that contained the works, and we made a proposed design that accommodated them. The Interfaith Center at the Presidio is now raising funds, helped by initial grants from the McDonald family, Camilla and George Smith, and the Save America's Treasures program which is administered by the National Park Service.

You can imagine that we are all mesmerized by the present uncertainties in Washington, D.C. and are hoping for another set of miracles in these troubled times!



Exterior Perspective, Presidio Chapel



Proposed McDonald Gallery, Presidio Chapel. Sources: Page & Turnbull.

Bibliography

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Online sources:

Christopher Alexander; R. G. Collingwood; Jonathan Edwards; Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and George Patton; 12th Army Group; World War II; Narcissus Quagliata.