

MacQuarrie and Leopold

Excerpt from *Gordon MacQuarrie: The Story of an Old Duck Hunter*

By Keith Crowley

The Wisconsin Historical Society Press is proud to announce the publication of the first full-length biography of one of Wisconsin's favorite writers, Gordon MacQuarrie, best known for his *Old Duck Hunters* stories. Author Michael McIntosh writes in his foreword to this new volume: "Gordon MacQuarrie was one of the most influential writers of his time—so much so that he shaped an entire generation of writers who are just now emerging in the mold that he created." This excerpt deals with MacQuarrie's contribution to the conservation and wildlife management movement.

In April 1936 Gordon MacQuarrie left the *Superior Evening Telegram* for the bigger, greener pastures of Milwaukee, where he became the first outdoor editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*. When MacQuarrie began at the *Journal* on April 19 he didn't have an official title, but he was in effect becoming the first full-time professional outdoor writer in the nation. Other men dabbled in outdoor news stories, but MacQuarrie was the first on record to specialize in the previously neglected field. Men like Jay "Ding" Darling of the *Des Moines Register* devoted part of their time to conservation and sporting stories, but their scope remained broad.

MacQuarrie focused on the outdoor life by mandate from the *Journal's* management, and he turned this position into one of the most coveted writing jobs in the country. . . .

Soon after MacQuarrie arrived in

This pen and ink sketch ran with MacQuarrie's first column in the Milwaukee Journal, April 19, 1936, and was the model for the MacQuarrie Foundation Medallion.



Milwaukee in 1936, he developed a personal relationship with Aldo Leopold. With Leopold's assistance MacQuarrie tackled the issues of wildlife management from a scientific viewpoint. He joined Leopold in advocating numerous policies not generally accepted by the ordinary sportsmen and sportswomen of the state.

While MacQuarrie was no scientist, he was deeply interested in the direction Leopold's work was taking. . . . In Leopold, MacQuarrie had an open line to the very latest information about subjects he held very dear—and no less importantly, to subjects he was obligated to cover as the outdoor editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*. In the late '30s and throughout the '40s, MacQuarrie and Leopold, who was then teaching in Madison, communicated frequently. They talked of the ever-changing face of modern conservation and of Leopold's

conservation principles, which directly conflicted with the beliefs of Wisconsin's sportsmen. MacQuarrie set about to learn from the master and to disseminate this information to his statewide audience. After all, Leopold's research and opinions had a direct effect on Wisconsin's sportsmen.

By the early 1940s Leopold had become a key player not only within the research and education community, but also within the political arena. In 1942 Wisconsin Governor Julius Heil invited Leopold to serve on the State Conservation Commission; shortly thereafter he chaired the Committee on Natural Resources. While Leopold did not always agree with the conclusions and methods of either body, his very presence gave these political organizations scientific credibility.

Leopold's position at the University of Wisconsin gave him the opportunity and the resources to implement his new philosophy at the "shack," a piece of dormant farmland the Leopold family had purchased to use as a retreat and laboratory. Leopold's attempts to reestablish the native ecosystem on this plot of ground



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MacQuarrie on assignment near Solon Springs, Wisconsin.

continually fascinated MacQuarrie. He visited Leopold at the shack several times and wrote columns for the *Journal* explaining Leopold's work.

The results of Leopold's grand experiment were published after his death in 1948. The treatise, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, has since become the primer for modern conservationists. It became an instant hit upon its publication in 1949, and it has never gone out of print. MacQuarrie's copy of the *Almanac* was well worn and dog-eared. He read it many times in his own search for a sense of fulfillment. In November 1949, after MacQuarrie had completely digested the book, he issued this proclamation to *Journal* readers:

A Sand County Almanac is a modern bible of conservation. Everyone in Wisconsin with any serious interest in the future of Wisconsin's soil, woods, fields and waters, will want to own a copy of this book, the final word from one of the greatest men ever to teach at the university of Wisconsin.¹

MacQuarrie obtained several exclusive interviews with Leopold for the *Milwaukee Journal* from 1936 through the 1940s. And his appreciation of the man was never more obvious than in a feature article for *Outdoor America* magazine, "Here Come the Biologists," published after MacQuarrie's death. In it he calls Leopold "the greatest news tipster of my experience" and pays homage to the scientists and the science that Leopold helped create.²

He also undoubtedly spoke to Leopold off the record on many occasions. MacQuarrie and Leopold hunted waterfowl together in the Mississippi River bottoms. They took several nature walks at Leopold's shack, of which MacQuarrie once wrote, "A sportsman, sitting with Leopold, can get a new pair of eyes for seeing here."³ In a private memo dated January 11, 1939, MacQuarrie scolded Leopold for not providing more information to the news-

papers—particularly the *Milwaukee Journal*. He wrote Leopold that “Fact is whenever I get something from you or your students it gets pretty sympathetic scrutiny. . . . I like the authenticity all of your work has. It ought to be in the paper, this paper and other papers. But my concern is this paper.”⁴

During a particularly turbulent time in 1943, when Wisconsin deer populations had grown to serious overabundance, MacQuarrie got Leopold to express his true sentiments about wildlife management for the record. “The real problem is not how we shall handle the deer in this emergency,” Leopold said. “The real problem is one of human management. . . .”⁵

During the early 1940s Wisconsin’s cherished deer herd had grown to unsafe levels in the face of mild winters and the absence of significant hunting pressure (from humans and from the much reviled wolves) during the first years of World War II. Many Wisconsinites viewed this unprecedented growth in the herd as a boon, but MacQuarrie, with his ever-widening biological perspective, saw that without dedicated management the bottom would drop out if Wisconsin was subjected to a harsh winter. It was.

By March 1943 the deer crisis had reached critical mass, and



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MacQuarrie was a stickler when it came to equipment. He was continually attending to his sizable collection of outdoors paraphernalia, or “the sinews of war” as he called it. Whether replacing worn decoy cords, mending a broken fly rod tip, oiling a reel, or cleaning his well-worn old doublegun, he considered “puttering” a favorite pastime.

MacQuarrie came off the fence in his *Journal* column. Early in the month MacQuarrie was asked to join the state’s Deer Committee as they toured northern Wisconsin to assess the damage. For three days the group tramped through deeryards and cutovers, barely believing the carnage they saw. Due to deep snow and frigid weather, the deer were dying in droves, and the forest was being denuded of anything mildly resembling feed. MacQuarrie knew it would be hard to explain the devastation to his readers; in his next *Journal* column he simply said the biologists “will never be believed by men and women who did not have the chance to get out there and see it with their own eyes.” Wisconsin Conservation Commissioner Virgil Dickinson said of the crisis, “Whatever we do about it they [the state’s sportsmen] will crucify us.”⁶

Before that trip MacQuarrie had allowed Leopold and his gang numerous occasions to express themselves in the *Journal*. After witnessing the devastation, he wholeheartedly supported the biologists and stopped pulling his punches. Leopold and fellow biologist William Feeney contended that 200,000 does should be eliminated from the state’s deer herd to reduce the mass starvation. MacQuarrie agreed and challenged his readers to support the experts.

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This position did not sit well with readers. “Bucks only” had been the popular sentiment for many years in Wisconsin, and many of MacQuarrie’s readers did not believe the situation warranted overhauling the deer hunting laws. MacQuarrie continued to defend the experts, saying, “John Q. Public wants his information . . . sugar-coated. . . . And he wants to sit there in the evening under the reading lamp and mebbe add a hunch or two of his own to the general picture. The time for hunches in the management of Wisconsin’s deer herd is over.”⁷

MacQuarrie took a fair amount of heat on the issue. It was the first time in his career that his written opinion did not gel with the mainstream public’s. But MacQuarrie was no shirker, and he stuck to his guns throughout the crisis. Eventually the antimanagement movement withered, but throughout MacQuarrie’s tenure at the *Journal* some John Q. Publics still clung tenaciously to the antimanagement vine.

From that point on MacQuarrie repeatedly and personally defended the fish and game managers in his *Journal* column. He used his newspaper pieces to provide the latest scientific theories and practices to readers who sometimes did not appreciate the full scope of the wildlife and fisheries situations. In 1949, when the deer population again grew to unsafe levels, Wisconsin sportsmen and “nature-lovers,” as MacQuarrie called them, demanded that the Conservation Department artificially feed the deer. MacQuarrie called the practice of deer feeding “money wasted” and advocated managing the herd, not feeding it.⁸

He could just as easily have used his column to lambaste the scientists and government agencies for their failings, as many of his contemporaries did, but he was beyond such tactics. In the beginning, however, the experts, Leopold included, were distrustful of newspapermen in general. They had been raked over the coals by journalists before, and for the newcomer MacQuarrie it was an uphill battle. MacQuarrie had to convince Leopold of his noble intentions. “It took just about one year,” MacQuarrie wrote, “for this newspaper reporter to convince Aldo Leopold that . . . I would not brutalize the facts.”⁹ MacQuarrie chose instead to clearly explain the scientific position to the oft-befuddled masses. It became a career-long trend in his columns.

During the 1940s’ deer crisis in Wisconsin, Leopold was subjected to harsh criticism from many segments of the Wisconsin outdoor society. Even some within the Conservation Department

suggested that Leopold would not be satisfied until no deer remained in Wisconsin.¹⁰ MacQuarrie bristled at the implication, then and later. The last of MacQuarrie’s freelance work

published was “Here Come the Biologists” in 1960. In that essay MacQuarrie recalled the poor treatment heaped on Leopold:

Leopold originated the concept of “the land ethic.” He said a great many things now quoted widely today, but let it not be forgotten that in his day he was upbraided—even reviled—by those

*assorted ignorami whose knowledge of wildlife ended with what grampaw told them.*¹¹

Throughout his life MacQuarrie had a great deal of faith in people’s ability to handle whatever outdoor crisis reared its head. This faith was common to his generation. Such great technological and scientific strides had been made in so many facets of life that many Americans developed a simplified view of life’s riddles. All things, they assumed, would be figured out—all problems solved in due time. ❧

1. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Right Off the Reel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 20, 1949.
2. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Here Come the Biologists,” draft, Gordon MacQuarrie Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
3. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Right Off the Reel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 20, 1949.
4. Gordon MacQuarrie, memo to Leopold, January 11, 1939, Aldo Leopold Archives, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
5. Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold, His Life and Work*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988): 444.
6. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Right Off the Reel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 23, 1943.
7. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Right Off the Reel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 28, 1943.
8. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Right Off the Reel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 8, 1949.
9. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Here Come the Biologists.”
10. Meine, p. 489
11. Gordon MacQuarrie, “Here Come the Biologists.”

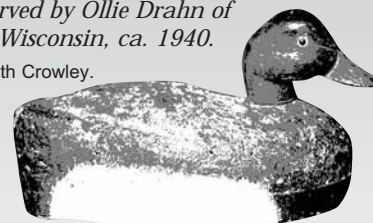
The Author



For more than fifteen years, **Keith Crowley** has been tramping the woods and waters of northwest Wisconsin. His freelance writing has appeared in such publications as *Sporting Classics*, *Wisconsin Outdoor Journal*, *Wisconsin Sportsman*, *Minnesota Sportsman*, *Rocky Mountain Game & Fish*, and *Florida Game & Fish*. He resides in Hudson, Wisconsin, with his wife and sons, but spends an inordinate amount of time at his retreat on the Eau Claire Lakes.

Cork bluebill decoy from MacQuarrie’s set. Carved by Ollie Drahn of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, ca. 1940.

Photo by Keith Crowley.



Gordon MacQuarrie: *The Story of an Old Duckhunter* is available through local bookstores. Members of the Wisconsin Historical Society can receive a 10 percent discount by identifying themselves as such and ordering the book by calling (800) 621-2736. Hardcover \$34.95 ISBN 0-87020-343-6; Paper \$22.95 ISBN 0-87020-344-4.