

# J. Farrell MacDonald

1875 - 1952

---

*"J. Farrell MacDonald was one of the most beloved and prolific character actors in Hollywood history."*

-Hal Erickson, *All Movie Guide Website*

Moonshiner, mountie, cop, cowboy, husband, hobo, priest, warden, detective and ship's captain are but a few of the many roles portrayed by J. Farrell MacDonald in motion pictures.

Joseph Farrell MacDonald was born in Waterbury, Connecticut on April 14, 1875, of parents of Scottish and Irish heritage. He was educated in local schools before his family moved to Ansonia. His mother, who operated a music store, *instilled in him a love of music which would later serve him well.*

He studied science and law at Yale University, where he also played football. He later obtained graduate certificates in both geology and mining engineering.

Film historian George A. Katchner deemed MacDonald "almost a genius . . . gifted in so many disciplines that it was hard for him to make a career choice." He worked as a reporter, sang grand opera in London and entered a Catholic seminary, only to leave for a musician's job in the Orient. He performed in minstrel shows and later toured with stage productions for close to two decades.

While he was still singing grand opera, he appeared in his first film, *The Unlucky Tramp* in 1906, for which he was paid a sum of \$5 to play ten different characters. Inspired to pursue a motion picture career, he sought employment with D.W. Griffith at Biograph Studios in New York, where he worked with Mack Sennett and Mary Pickford. In 1909 he became the first actor hired for the stock company of Carl Laemmle's studio, Imp Company, earning \$35 a week. When Laemmle formed Universal Studios in 1912, he brought MacDonald west with him to Hollywood.

MacDonald began his directing career in 1912 with *The Worth of a Man* and later directed the silent versions of the Wizard of Oz films. He is also credited with giving Harold Lloyd and Hal Roach their first film roles. When Roach set up his own studio, with Lloyd as his principal attraction, he hired MacDonald to direct as well as act. MacDonald directed forty-three films before returning to acting fulltime, noting that although the director's \$150 a week salary was unbelievable, the grief of the job was too much for him. In those days, a director would also rewrite the script, scout locations, gather props, supervise wardrobe and sometimes even operate the camera.

After serving in the First World War, MacDonald began a lifelong friendship and working relationship with John Ford, who directed him in twenty-five films over the next thirty-one years. During the silent era, he notably appeared in *3 Bad Men* and *Riley the Cop*. His role as Corporal Casey in *The Iron Horse* received excellent reviews and brought him fame.

With a voice that matched his personality perfectly, MacDonald was busier than ever in the early talkie era, usually playing such workaday roles as cops and railroad engineers. He played a disgruntled father-of-the-bride in *Abie's Irish Rose* (1928). In 1931, he appeared in fourteen films, playing a detective in the first version of *The Maltese Falcon* and Knute Rockne in *The Spirit of Notre Dame*. In 1932 alone, he showed



up in over twenty films! Even when his footage was limited, he was often given a moment or two to shine, as witness his emotional curtain speech in Shirley Temple's *Our Little Girl*.

Aside from films, MacDonald enjoyed painting and exhibited his work at a Los Angeles gallery. In the late 1930's he taught acting at the University of Southern California and in 1937 he opened his own film school called The Hollywood Motion Picture Institute.

He kept up his workload into the 1940's, often appearing in the films of Preston Sturges and Frank Capra, including the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*. He appeared in Westerns with John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy. One of his choicest roles of the decade, however, was that of the Dodge City barkeep in Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

MacDonald continued working right up to his death. He appeared in a Superman television episode in 1951 which was expanded into *Superman and the Mole-Men*, the first full-length Superman feature film. By his own account, he appeared in 750 films by the end of the 1930's, bringing his total to approximately 850 films, of which he was featured in more than 150.

J. Farrell MacDonald died on August 2, 1952 in Hollywood, California.