

Iris MacAulay

Iris was a lifetime member of Clan MacAulay and our oldest active member.

Source: The Block Island Times

8/28/10 — Iris Macaulay Lewis, a long-time resident of Block Island and for a while the island's oldest citizen, passed away quietly in South Windsor, Conn. at 1:30 a.m., August 23, at the home of her daughter, Berris Pantaluk.

Iris was born July 11, 1905, in Toronto, Ontario to Ana Nelline and John Hamilton Macaulay. Ana Nelline was by birth a member of the Pandaraug family of Bombay, India, who traced their lineage back several thousand years to Persian royalty. John Hamilton Macaulay was born in Kibworth Beauchamp, near Leicester, England, where the Macaulay family had lived for many generations. A family forebear, English historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, was Iris's great-great-great-great uncle.



Iris was orphaned at the age of three, after she and her mother both contracted diphtheria. Her mother, age 26, died in the bed next to Iris in a city hospital ward in Newark, N.J. Iris lived with her aunt and uncle, Irene and Harold Littledale, Jr., for two years, then was sent to an orphanage in Peekskill, N.Y., where her younger sister, Rosemary, had been placed.

In 1911, at the age of six, Iris was put on a ship, the New York, by her uncle and sent alone across the Atlantic to live with her Aunt Olga in South Wales. Two years later, Iris's sister, Rosemary, was sent to live in the household.

Iris attended Howells School in Llandaff, Wales, from 1917 to 1921, the same school her mother had attended. At school, she learned to appreciate natural gifts that she would enjoy all her life: a flair for learning ancient and modern languages, a love of writing and reading, a love of learning, and an ease in learning and performing music that stemmed from her gift of perfect pitch.

At age of 16, Iris was removed to Tower Cressy, an institution in London for underprivileged children run by the National Children's Adoption Association, where she trained as a nanny.

Iris met relatives while in London. She had tea with her Pandaraug grandparents. Her Grandfather Pandaraug had at one time been the High Sheriff of Bombay, a prestigious post in colonial India.

Iris also met her Macaulay relatives in London, and she and her sister were invited to live with their aunt and uncle, Mary Macaulay Phillips and Dr. Edgar Vaughan Phillips, in Kibworth Beauchamp. Iris said, in later life, "Aunt Mollie and Uncle Edgar were the dearest people I'd ever met, and their world was a whole new world to me."

Upon graduation from Tower Cressy, Iris trained first as a hospital nurse, then as a Montessori nursery school teacher at All Saints Nursery College in Harrogate, Yorkshire. She had always loved children, another trait that followed her throughout her life.

At age 22, she returned alone to America, "Looking for roots somewhere," she said, and she put her Montessori training to work as a governess and nanny to various families. In the ensuing years, she crossed the Atlantic 11 times by ship and once by air to visit her relatives in England, but by that time considered America her home.

In 1932, Iris married Wallace I.A. Carlson. Their two sons, Aulay and Douglas, were born in New York, and the family lived on Long Island. The marriage ended in divorce.

Iris married her second husband, Bertrand Mulloy Lewis, in 1941, and the couple moved to Connecticut, living first in Middlebury, then Washington. Their neighbors included Louisa and Alexander Calder, who had children the same age as Iris's sons. The families became close friends.

Iris and Bert's daughter, Berris, was born in Waterbury, Conn. The family moved to Middlebury in 1946. That marriage also ended in divorce.

Iris moved her family to Woodbury and took a job at Southbury Training School as a vocational instructor. Her career at Southbury encompassed 12 years, during which she introduced then-innovative programs for teaching simple skills to teenage girls. "My programs were original and pragmatic and the children loved them," she recalled in later life.

She started the first class in the state of Connecticut for handicapped children at Harkness, near New London, employing Montessori methods. "I finally succeeded, after many arguments, in having my students allowed to take part in all the programs the other children had. They went to the gymnasium, played games that they could play from their wheelchairs, and they loved to sing. I also loved to sing, and we gave concerts," she recalled.

When the commute to New London became too much, Iris returned to Southbury Training School and took charge of the weaving room, teaching boys with Down's Syndrome to weave on 18 large looms. After sewing strips of colored corduroy together in various lengths and colors, Iris taught the students to weave them into "Truly gorgeous rugs, all of which sold at our yearly fair like hotcakes, and we were asked for more," she remembered.

In Woodbury, Iris had become friendly with Theodore and Kyra Bostroem, Russian émigrés from aristocratic families. The Bostroems offered Iris and her family a great deal of help and support.

Through other friends in Connecticut, Iris heard of Block Island and started coming here in 1950. From the first, she said she felt drawn to the island and felt she belonged here. Her friend Kyra Bostroem made it possible for Iris to stay in a cottage on Center Road, behind the house owned by Kyra's niece, Manya Ritter.

She made the island her permanent home in 1967. It was on Block Island that Iris found a sense of having roots in a place, a feeling she had never had before. She spoke of her years of living on Block Island as the best time of her life.

For many of those years, she lived in an apartment at E. Searles Ball housing on West Side Road. "I love to look out of my window and see the Great Salt Pond, whether it's misted over or clear. I like to see what birds are flying around. I enjoy looking across the pond at night, for the North Light to turn on," she said.

In 1998, she became eligible to be the official holder of Block Island's gold-headed ebony cane, presented to the town in 1909 by the Boston Post newspaper company with the stipulation that it "always be held by the oldest citizen of this Town." Referring to herself as "The Matriarch," Iris took the cane out for ceremonial occasions: participation in the Fourth of July parade and watching the Polar Bear swim from the safety of Fred Benson Town Beach.

During her years on Block Island, Iris remained active as a Care Wear volunteer, knitting baby blankets and sets of sweaters, caps and booties that she sent to hospitals all over the country for premature babies. She was involved with the Elder Care Task Group, and at one point set up a legal defense fund for Rustic Rides. She enjoyed photography, and one of her photos was used in the 1995 Scenic Rhode Island Calendar.

When she was close to 100 years of age, Iris went ice boating for the first time in her life with island resident and ice boater Charlie Gale. She was thrilled and exhilarated by the experience.

Iris chose to leave the island after her 100th birthday and relocate to South Windsor, Conn., to live near family on the mainland.

In addition to her daughter, Berris Shelagh Pantaluk, Iris is survived by two sons, Aulay Phillips Carlson and Douglas Gilmore Carlson; 10 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.