An impressive legacy from a thoughtful painter
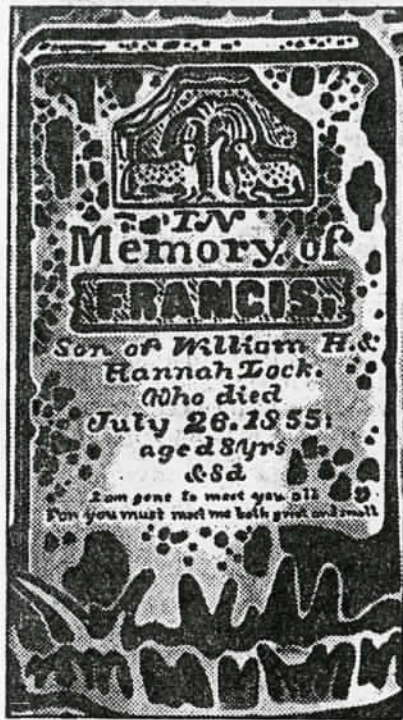

Detail from In Memory of Francis — Salt Creek Cemetery, N. Yarmouth, CN Baggage Cart: subject is secondary to color.

BY KAY KRITZWISER

IN 1853, VINCENT van Gogh was born a crow's flight from The Hague, and how he lived and worked and died is the stuff of familiar legend. In 1921, Clark McDougall was born in St. Thomas, a stone's throw from London, Ont. With the exception of the war years, he lived and painted and died there. He makes a flicker on the art horizon as yet, but it is bright enough to see a common fire between the two men.

Two years before he died in 1980, McDougall was painting his St. Thomas landscapes in bright flecks of oil encased by or containing black enamel paint in the manner of van Gogh and his Cloisonnist contemporaries.

A survey of his paintings (15 canvases and four watercolors) opens today at the Mira Godard Gallery, and will continue until Aug. 24. The creative fire is there, banked, awaiting the stoking of wider opinion which he took pains to avoid in his lifetime.

"Reclusive," he described himself in small, precise handwriting in one of the letters he wrote to a dealer friend, an admirer of his paint-ings. "I'm reclusive particularly when I am rolling along in great shape. I don't like to do anything else but take advantage of the work rhythm."

That aim of Clark McDougall began when he was 11 and discovered who his real heroes were. They were not your cowboy Tom Mix nor your swat king Babe Ruth, but two St. Thomas painters, Ross Osgoode and W. St. Thomas Smith, who gave time and criticism to encourage the small boy.

His spark was fed in the old St. Thomas library where he learned about watercolors from books such as The History of British Watercolor or Painting and Technique of Landscape Painting in oils.

The young individualist had the courage to go to the source for advice. He saw reproductions of paintings by Charles Burchfield in the old Life magazine. He went to Buffalo to meet the American landscape artist. "Avoid art schools," Burchfield advised him. Stick with painting from nature. McDougall took his advice. He dropped out of school at 16 and for the rest of his career he deliberately kept his subject range limited, but his eye open to influence. He knew his own score: to be a painter, the other world well lost.

GLOBE AND MAIL. AUG. 6. 1983
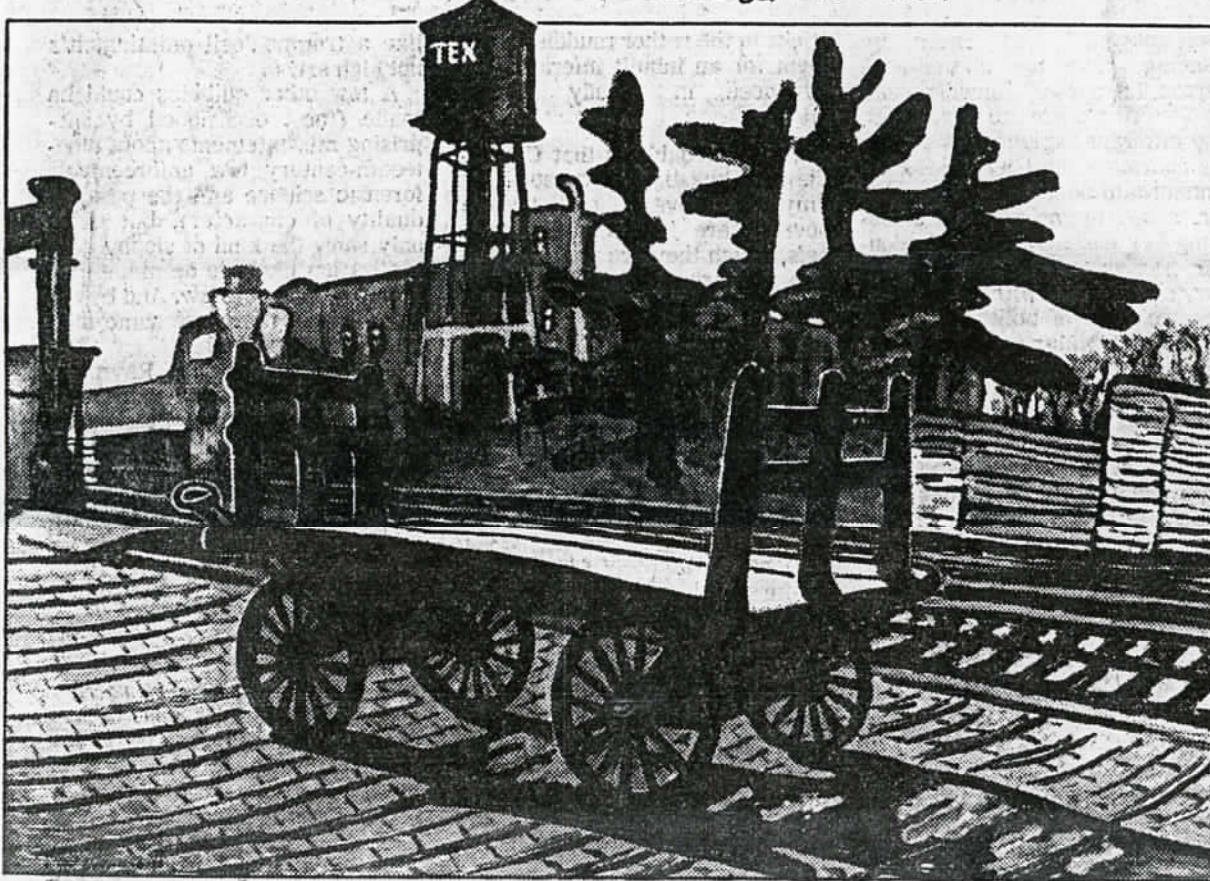
In 1950, McDougall visited Montreal and saw his first Henri Matisse at the height of his Fauve period. He saw the Canadians, John Lyman and James Wilson Morrice. In an entry in his notebook dated Jan. 1, 1980, he recalled that experience: "I knew that from then on, painting would never be the same for me again and I could hardly wait to come home and start in to a series of paintings applying new color knowledge. From '50 on, I kept working in a series, with each series being a forward surge from the previous."

The collection at the Mira Godard Gallery becomes an evaluation of these progressively personal stages. The gallery, which is handling the McDougall estate, plans a series of exhibitions of his work, including one in St. Thomas. The present exhibition has been organized by art consultant Cathy Williams.

The exhibition surveys the work from his early watercolors to his Fauve-influenced oils ("the French concept," he called it) to the final stage of his black enamel paintings which he related to the influence of van Gogh.

"As this wild color took over, I had to control it," he wrote in 1970. "Therefore I had to become more cerebral and concentrate much more on the design. When I introduced the first black in my oil paintings, I did so in order to make it free me to concentrate on the color problem. I painted or drew in the black first, and laid colors in a flat way alongside the black. The black showed the form up and at times the line was swallowed up a bit so that the thickness varied. Van Gogh used a similar method at Arles. I suppose in a sense, I was undergoing the experiments he had carried out there."

The black enamel skein which held his colors in paintings such as Summer Wildflowers (1961) and Stelco Gate — Bear Lewis Farm, N. Yarmouth (1977) caused a powerful vibrancy. Form in the recurring bubbles of paint asserts itself tirelessly against the black. Patter of petal or road rut or the insistent weed growth around a headstone to an 8-year-old boy (In Memory of Francis — Salt Creek Cemetery, N. Yarmouth, 1969) seems a matter of McDougall's painstaking control.

The dominance of the black enamel paintings troubled him.

"I can't help the fact that I'm my own most severe critic," he wrote in a letter in 1978. "This problem has to be solved. In winter, when the whole of nature is subdued by low-key coloring, I react against the black enamel. I realize that some of my hostility which is directed against the style now is a seasonal one."

Mira Godard first encountered McDougall's work when she was associated with the Agnes LeFort Gallery in Montreal in the late sixties. "But he didn't want to sell his work. His wife was musical and he would send me tapes of her radio programs — but not his paintings," she recalled.

For a thoughtful painter who worked and reworked his familiar territory, McDougall left an impressive body of work. The subject, as in an early painting such as CN Baggage Cart (1956), is secondary to color. The daring calendar-pink

McDougall: 'As this wild color took over, I had to control it.'

of his sky is justified somehow in the way he pulls it down to the painting's base of railway tracks and ties. In Talbot and Inkerman Streets, St. Thomas (1958), that passion for uncompromising black begins to contain his winter colors in an exploratory way which continued into his last canvases.

In his lifetime, his work was included in several group exhibitions in Ontario. He had a few solo exhibitions, including the one at Art Gallery of St. Thomas-Elgin in St. Thomas in 1974, and the one Alvin Balkind gave him in 1977 when Balkind was Chief Curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Whether he would agree or not, McDougall's time for a wider circuit has come.