

Clark McDougall

(1921-1980)

WRITTEN BY PAUL BALDWIN

Clark McDougall was a St. Thomas artist, a self-taught painter, who, in 40 years of effort, not only painted a large quantity of landscapes, streetscapes, and portraits, but also experimented with new styles and subjects, developing such quality and uniqueness that his work was recognized nationally and eventually, widely appreciated locally.

Clark first had interest in art as a teenager and in the late 1930s began riding his bicycle to the New Dam area of North Yarmouth to paint small, glorious watercolours of mid-summer and autumn scenes. Thereafter, he made a study of the techniques of the Great Masters, shifted to oils, and began his experimentations with the *isms* of the Modern Art: Impressionism, Post Impressionism, and Fauvism. In the mid 1950s, he painted scenes of St. Thomas, Port Stanley, and North Yarmouth using shocking reds, yellows, greens, and purples typical of French artist Henri Matisse, causing, I recall, local doubt as to his worth as an artist.

At this time, I knew Clark as a neighbour. He lived and had his studio at 56 Inkerman Street, around the corner from our house. While other men in our area were railroaders, steelworkers, or printers with homes, families, and hobbies, Clark was single, boarded with his mother, and was totally focused on painting. He worked occasionally at Timken's but only to earn enough money to support himself as an artist. To my knowledge, he never drove a car

and traveled outside St. Thomas and London only to paint, exhibit, or tour galleries.

Before I knew Clark, from just after World War II until 1953, while he was occasionally in St. Thomas, he was often elsewhere, painting in Erin, Sand Lake, Drayton, and Glen Allen, exhibiting in London, Hamilton, and Montreal, and visiting galleries in Montreal, Quebec City, and Buffalo. On a trip to Quebec in 1950, he was inspired by the works of John Lyman and James Morrice and adopted what he referred to as "the French logic of painting". In Buffalo, the collections and personalities of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery both influenced and reassured him, all leading to the maturity and confidence that culminated in the Black Enamels of the early 1960s.

In the late '50s and '60s, Clark lived locally and increasingly focused on subjects in North Yarmouth. I recall his friends, Bear Lewis and Reverend A. H. Johnston of Grace United Church, picking him up at his Inkerman St. house and driving him up Edgeware Road or north of the New Dam. Here he photographed and sketched the scenes and details of the Kettle Creek valley, Norman Thompson's barn, Buckes' farm, and Dan Patterson's. From sketchbooks and slides, he then painted his landscapes of North Yarmouth, using vibrant colours and black outlines.

With black enamel paint from Medlyn's Hardware and vivid oils or acrylics, Clark created his best works.

Speaking some years later, he said he was excited by the intriguing contrast and the tension created by using both the flat oil and the shiny enamel. He also must have felt empowered and supremely confident for with the black enamel technique he then painted garish streetscapes and startling perspectives of houses, barns, machinery, and lands of North Yarmouth. Canadian Art Historian Dennis Reid praises the technique and compares the result to stained glass windows while Toronto art critic Gary Dault refers to Clark's art as "curious and refreshing works... bright pools of entrancing oil color" and says that "McDougall's colors end up glowing like cool gems on hot tar."

Such praise pleased Clark. His works sold, were in major exhibitions, and were included in numerous private and public collections, both in Canada and the United States. Unfortunately, his time in the sun was short-lived as he died prematurely on December 17, 1980.

But fortunately, he was inspired to paint and, with some personal sacrifice, chose to dedicate his life to art. In so doing, he has left us a significant gallery of art and a unique record of the local history of Elgin.

Top: From Fowler's Kitchen, 1968
32" x 24", Oil, Black Enamel on Masonite
Permanent Collection St. Thomas-Elgin Public Art Centre

Bottom: Untitled: Farm Lane in Winter, n.d.
watercolour on paper mounted on masonite
80 x 59.7 cm
Museum London, Gift of Marian and Alfred Murray,
Islington, Ontario, 1988
(Photo Credit: John Tambllyn)
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Paul Baldwin is a lifelong resident of Elgin, a retired teacher and administrator. He has a keen interest in biking, travel, and local history.

