

## State of the Art-Nancy Bauer-Salon, TJ-July 9, 2016

I was eager to see David McKay's exhibit, "Ancestral Roots", at Gallery 78, but all of a sudden I saw that it was going to be finished that day at 4 PM. I hurried over there at 3. Some of the paintings were of McKay's trip to Scotland and Ireland, some of New Brunswick. The landscape of his ancestors had much in common with that of his present home. I was much taken with a small watercolour of a footbridge across a river. One interesting group of four paintings showed the evolution of a large egg tempera. Three watercolours were of a barn in a field, with a branch of a pine tree each placed differently across the bottom third of the painting. McKay explored various colours for the sky. His use of the smaller, quicker watercolours to come to the final composition of the larger, more painstaking egg temperas is something that has fascinated me for many years.

For five years he and I each had studios on the third floor of a building housing a Sunday school and when we had to leave it, shared the tower of Gallery 78 for 19 years, he on the second floor, I on the third. In the Sunday school building we shared a bathroom, and I was from the first day intrigued to see on the sink tiny bottles of paint, which turned out to be egg tempera. He taught me how the medium works. The amazing thing is that he had taught himself the process. From the beginning I kept a journal of our lives up there and used it to write a piece for ArtsAtlantic.

My article, "Excerpts from the McKay Journal", begins: "Monday, October 29, 1984. David McKay and I meet at the sink where he is washing paint from dishes and I am getting water for coffee. 'Ah, an eggshell,' I say. 'You must be working on the egg tempera.' 'Yes. I am going to finish the Christmas tree this week, at last!' He has been working on a commission to paint the tree in front of Saint John's Golden Ball building. A few days ago he explained the chief technical problem he must solve—how to get the tree lights, and especially the star at the top, to be luminous."

When I dug out the article, I was surprised to see how long ago that was. In that ancient ArtsAtlantic, I wrote, "He works in series. 'I get a cluster of ideas, and then I do the watercolours about each one. Finally I do the egg tempera.'" And here I was, 32 years later, admiring the same process. Twelve years ago I wrote a piece about McKay and his process for the Telegraph-Journal's New Brunswick Reader.

Of all works of art I know most intimately my father's watercolours, McKay's watercolours and egg temperas, and Stephen May's pencil drawings and oils. When my family bought our house, an outbuilding was designated "the studio", but although it held the materials, it never was turned into one. Prodded by the approach of the annual Newspaper Guild's exhibit, my father would get out his gear and set up in the den. Because there was no room for an easel, he sat in his usual chair with a board on his lap, the tubes, brushes and water sharing the side table with his pipe and ashtray. McKay still has his own studio in Gallery 78. May built a studio in his backyard—I've been there several times.

When I visit my kids, I don't weigh down my luggage with a book because I know there will be interesting books there. In Riverview for my grandson's graduation, I saw among my son's fishing books Wayne Curtis' *Of Earthly and River Things: An Angler's Memoir*, published in 2012 by Goose Lane Editions. I didn't have time to finish it, but I was delighted to see when I got home that I do own it and for some mysterious reason have never read it. I think it's going to become my favourite of Curtis' books. Two of the essays, "A Dam in a Grove" " and "River Legacy" describe in detail the handing down from generation to generation the lore of the Miramichi river system. The family feeling that Curtis portrays is both charming and vivid.

He travels down the Cains River with his three sons, stopping at places associated with family history, detailing the handling of the canoe, the sights and sounds of the river and its banks. He reminisces about taking his sons out on the river when they were little, how carefree he was with their safety. Later he goes along when the sons take their own sons. Because he is getting old, the sons care for him as tenderly as they do for the grandsons. Their contemporary ways mean that everyone is prudently strapped into life jackets.