

CHRONOLOGY,PART 1: 1919 TO 1949

‘My painting is almost entirely autobiographical – it tells you where I am at any given time, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in.’¹



Ferrier/McCahon family at the beach, c. 1924. Colin McCahon is in the foreground wearing a hat.
Courtesy of Aigantighe Gallery, Timaru, New Zealand. Photograph by William Ferrier.

1919

Colin McCahon was born on 1 August 1919 in Timaru, New Zealand, the eldest son of Ethel and John McCahon of Dunedin. His father was an accountant; his maternal grandfather, William Ferrier, had been a professional photographer and amateur watercolourist. Although Ferrier died in 1921, McCahon remembered the many paintings in his grandmother’s house and the art materials in his grandfather’s darkroom.

‘My grandfather William Ferrier was both a photographer and a landscape painter in watercolour. We grew up with



William Ferrier, *Breakwater, Timaru, Running a Southerly Gale* 1888
Oil on canvas, 36 x 51 cm
Beatrice McCahon Collection, Timaru, New Zealand
Courtesy of Aigantighe Gallery, Timaru, New Zealand

Marja Bloem and Martin Browne

his paintings on the walls, and at holiday times visiting my Grandmother’s house in Timaru (I don’t think I ever met my Grandfather) we lived in rooms hung floor to ceiling with watercolours and prints. Once, suffering from mumps, I think it was, I spent a time confined to bed in what had been my Grandfather’s darkroom: red glass in the window, and paints and brushes, a palette, in shallow drawers. I don’t remember doing any painting at this time myself, I was probably intimidated by the obvious professionalism of the environment. Possibly the mumps and dark redness of the room were together too discouraging.

‘This little room was seldom, if ever, used. The occurrence of mumps in a crowded holiday household made segregation imperative and so it was that having met the “finished” work both in Timaru and Dunedin I now met the sacred materials of “art”’.²

THE 1920S

The McCahon family – Colin’s parents, brother Jim and sister Beatrice – lived in Dunedin, first on Highgate and later moving to Prestwick St, Maori Hill.



Dunedin, c. 1925.
Courtesy of Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Photograph by S. G. Smith.

‘All children apparently draw and paint. I drew and painted, so did my brother and sister. Some painting I was pleased with and some I was not. I recall a drawing of kingcups, flowers I only knew of through a book illustration. I was pleased with this drawing and later with others, an illustration of Wordsworth’s “Daffodils”, a few Venetian scenes with black posts to tie gondolas to, and many South Sea Islands with feathery palms....I also produced an excellent likeness of Joan Crawford with one large and staring eye and a loop of smooth hair falling alluringly over the other. Some years after this, at the Dunedin Art School, I produced a horrible version of this image, first in clay and then cast in plaster of Paris.

‘Once when I was quite young – we were still living on Highgate and hadn’t yet shifted to Prestwick Street – I had a few days of splendour. Two new shops had been built next door, one was Mrs McDonald’s Fruit Shop and Dairy, the other was taken by a hairdresser and tobacconist. Mrs McDonald had her window full of fruit and other practical items. The hairdresser had his window painted with HAIRDRESSER AND TOBACCONIST. Painted in gold and black on a stippled red ground, the lettering large and bold, with shadows, and a feeling of being projected right through the glass and across the pavement. I watched the work being done and fell in love with signwriting. The grace of the lettering as it arched across the window in gleaming gold, suspended on its dull red field but leaping free from its own black shadow, pointed to a new and magnificent world of painting. I watched from outside as the artist working inside slowly separated himself from me (and light from dark) to make his new creation.

‘Following this, I did a lot of signwriting. Our house was in white roughcast but the doors to the various backyard “offices” were of wood and offered surfaces well-suited to poster painting. (I suppose my present glad acceptance of



John and Ethel McCahon, with Beatrice, Colin and Jim, Dunedin, c. 1925.

Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

Pop Art is in some way related to this experience.)³ During this period McCahon attended Maori Hill Primary School:

‘I arrived in standard one hardly able to add or read. I was a left-hander who couldn’t write as the teacher required. I had been battered to utter misery and exhaustion, bashed with straps, held hostage in front of the class, or made to stand up for ridicule on the desk top.

‘Somehow I had moved on to standard one, where a lady floated like a waterlily into the room and into my life. She was as lovely as she looked. She came, I think, from Lumsden, and was named Miss Loudon. She worked hard, and got me going. I fell in love and, for my loved one, worked well. I was happy at last and thankful for her care and attention.

‘Then Miss Wishart. Love affairs can drop dead over the six-week summer holidays. And coming back to school, at the beginning of February, I met a very “with it” lady, standing beside a large black cat and witch’s cauldron bubbling over an open fire – on the blackboard. I recall earth reds and orange yellows in what she wore. She had short hair (dyed red?) and was reputed to have come from the *art school in Christchurch*!

‘The cat was her mind-opener and then, BANG into lively arithmetic! All talked and worked – and, BANG into story and poetry! Tennyson, Wordsworth, struggling with the moderns, *and* wonderful exercises in formal English spelling. You never knew what was happening to you. Poetry – words – words and pictures – and music – and grabbing it all. A year of joy, and at the end of this happiness, the awful threat of “Miss Guy” – the ogre of Maori Hill school – and me moving on *there* next year.

‘Miss Guy was small and neat in nothing clothes. She was well-ordered and used a strap. The whole younger school looked forward to her domination with a kind of juicy horror. We trembled in fear. *She* came into the room, and hush and horror filled us all, and our fears became more fearful. She was a tough lady and a relentless teacher. What she taught was forever, and very real. Her real subject, as I look back, was “order” – the order of thinking, looking and living. The glamour was over and, with it, the horror of the infant school. A calm and stern discipline held us in a teaching web. All that had gone before was great: Miss Loudon’s sympathy and help; Miss Wishart’s gladness and enthusiasm. But now came the relentless Miss Guy, who taught me to understand that the only way to put all the information I had together was by my own hard work. Miss Guy was my most real angel.

‘The following year we moved to Oamaru, and I went to Waitaki Boys’ Junior High, and cleaned up the standard five prize list – for Miss Loudon, Miss Wishart and Miss Guy.

‘My academic career ended about there. I accepted my fate and became a painter.’⁴

With the family tradition of an interest in the visual arts, the McCahons were regular visitors to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and also frequented other galleries and exhibitions:

‘The Dunedin Art Gallery offered a Russell Flint, a female nude with swirling draperies called “The Banner Dance”; a large still-life with excessive detail, but fascinating; a huge, dark shipwreck; a Laura Knight; and others. It had a very special smell and a more sacred feeling than the Art Society



Frances Hodgkins, *Summer* 1912
Watercolour and charcoal, 58.6 cm x 49.8 cm [paper size]
Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand

could ever achieve. Was this because the Art Society was “us” and this was “them”? – from Overseas, or Old? Or was it just a difference in disinfectants used by the respective caretakers? Perhaps the Art Gallery cleaners used a brand also used in the city’s Presbyterian churches. None of this worried me at the time. The Gallery smell then heralded nothing but pleasure.⁵

Colin McCahon particularly loved a watercolour entitled *Summer*, painted around 1912 by Dunedin’s Frances Hodgkins. Like many New Zealanders and Australians of the time, Hodgkins had travelled to Europe for study, subsequently making her home in England and painting widely both there and in France. Although she was accepted as an important painter in the British Modernist movement, Hodgkins retained her ties with New Zealand, regularly sending work back for exhibition. She remains considered the most important early modern New Zealand artist. Of *Summer*, McCahon wrote:

‘It sang from the wall, warm and beautiful, beautiful faces beaming from summer blossoms. It was strong and kind and lovely. When we shifted to Oamaru....I took that picture with me in my mind and painted myself my own version. This painting I loved too, not for itself but for the more accessible remembrance of the other it made possible.’⁶

‘We were a gallery-going family and went to all the exhibitions. At this time the big artistic event of the Dunedin year was the large Otago Art Society exhibition held in the Early Settlers’ Hall.

‘When you are young and in love with paint and with painting even inferior paintings become proper food. Later,

increasing discrimination robs the experience of its first joy: a critical eye is necessary for the painter but this very eye, seeing that there are blemishes in the beloved, destroys pure joy.’⁷

Notwithstanding the delights of *Summer*, the paintings on view in Dunedin’s galleries gave no hint of the new directions art was taking in Europe. For information on these developments, McCahon was fortunate to stumble on photographs in a copy of the *Illustrated London News*.

‘Some time, I don’t quite know when, out for a Sunday visit with the family, I discovered Cubism. This world was one I felt I already knew and was at home in. And so I was, as by this time the Cubists’ discoveries had become a part of our environment. Lampshades, curtains, linoleums, decorations in cast plaster: both the interiors and exteriors of homes and commercial buildings were influenced inevitably by this new magic. But to see it all as it was in the beginning, that was a revelation.

‘It was a dull, uninteresting afternoon. We were looking through copies of the *Illustrated London News*. The Cubists were being exhibited in London, were news, and so were illustrated. I at once became a Cubist, a staunch supporter and a sympathiser, one who could read the Cubists in their own language and not only in the watered-down translations provided by architects, designers and advertising agencies. I was amazed when others could not share this bright new vision of reality. I began to investigate Cubism, too enthusiastically joining the band of translators myself.’⁸

Recalling this period in his 1972 survey exhibition catalogue, McCahon wrote, ‘I was very lucky and grew up knowing I would be a painter. I never had any doubts about this. I knew it as a very small boy and I knew it later.’⁹

THE 1930S

Although during this era New Zealand art remained dominated by Western – and, in particular, English – techniques and traditions, a nascent movement emerged that sought to explore qualities of ‘New Zealandness’. As it had been since settlement in the 1840s, landscape painting continued as the most popular form of expression. Faithful to the often spectacular and untouched scenery in front of them, artists sought to capture these vast vistas of natural beauty, within which the traces of human presence were minimal, if visible at all. Notable in many of the images is the peculiar clarity of light, and correspondingly heavy shadows, which are a feature of New Zealand – the result of the closeness of the sea, and the prevailing westerly winds that leave the air sharp and clear.

By the 1930s most of the major towns and cities had well-supported public art galleries and art societies – many of which had been established during the colonial era as indicators of ‘civilisation’. Yet the influences of Modernism, which were sweeping Europe at that time, remained largely

absent from this artistic milieu. Instead, for information about the great works of Western art history, and the new trends being developed in Europe, interested New Zealanders were dependent on printed reproductions in magazines and illustrated newspapers. The result was often a distorted idea of the colour, scale and surface of the originals.

'It was inevitable...when in the nineteen-thirties a search for a national artistic image and style was undertaken, that the landscape should have borne the brunt of that futile quest.'¹⁰

1930-31

The death of McCahon's grandmother in late 1927, the subsequent failure of the family business in Timaru, and the onset of the Great Depression, precipitated a move by the family to Oamaru around August 1930. There McCahon



Oamaru, c. 1930.

Courtesy of Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Photograph by Tanner Brothers Ltd.

attended Waitaki Junior High School.

'Oamaru was a fine place to be. There were school plays, Saturday mornings on the harbour dredge, rafts on the lagoon. I remember also a parachutist whose parachute failed to open and the white cross erected against the low North Otago hills where he fell. I have often used both the cross and these hills in later paintings. On trips to the Waitaki dam site we passed this landscape.

'At the same time I had a good art teacher. She seemed old, perhaps she wasn't, had faded red hair and was encouraging.'¹¹

In December 1931 the McCahon family moved back to Dunedin.

1932-35

After the family's return from Oamaru, McCahon attended Otago Boys' High School, a place he later described as a 'school for the unseeing' and the period as 'the most

unforgettable horror of my youth'.¹² Fortunately McCahon's parents continued to take an active interest in what was being exhibited in Dunedin. Equally important was the encouragement they gave their children to avail themselves of the knowledge that could be acquired from books.

'Monday evenings were set aside for the purpose of study at the Dunedin Public Library. Its collection of art books was particularly good....Among them could be found books on modern art and periodicals like *The Studio*. Such publications kindled in McCahon a curiosity about modern art in general and again stimulated his interest in Cubism...'¹³

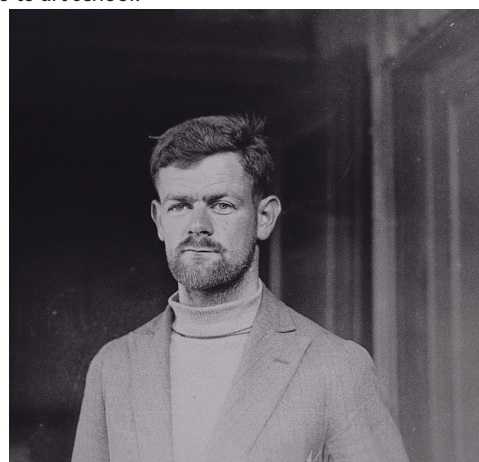
In the years 1932-34 McCahon attended Saturday morning art classes run by Russell Clark, a respected artist and 'splendid teacher', as McCahon said later.¹⁴ These classes were held in a large studio at the rear of John McIndoe Ltd, the printing and publishing firm for which Clark worked. Occasionally – when weather permitted – painting and sketching classes were held outdoors. McCahon's interest in the formal qualities of the landscape, and of certain symbols – such as the Cross – developed from this period on.

Responding to an enquiry as to his memories of McCahon as a student, Clark later wrote:

'Frankly I am unable to remember anything he produced in class but I can remember vividly the first watercolours he brought to show me. They were very unusual in approach and extremely interesting. We thought them very advanced in those days. Remember, even Impressionism was considered rather outrageous in the dour Dunedin climate of the early thirties...'¹⁵

1936

After 'a long and dismal struggle'¹⁶ with his father, McCahon left high school midway through 1936. He worked for the Scoullar and Chisholm furniture store until he was allowed to go to art school.



Toss Woollaston, 1936.

Rodney Kennedy Collection. Courtesy of Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand and the Woollaston Estate.

In the summer months McCahon paid several visits to an exhibition of landscape paintings by M.T. (Toss) Woollaston being shown in rented rooms on Broadway in Dunedin. Their subject was scenes of the Nelson region – an area in the north of New Zealand's South Island. McCahon was deeply impressed with Woollaston's work, recalling it later as 'wonderful and magnificent interpretations of a New Zealand landscape; clean, bright with New Zealand light, and full of air.'¹⁷ Eventually Rodney Kennedy (see below)



Toss Woollaston, *Mapua* 1935
Charcoal and oil on canvas mounted on board, 26.7 x 35.6 cm
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand
Presented by Mr and Mrs R.N. Field, 1982
Mapua was amongst the works McCahon saw in Woollaston's first solo exhibition, held in Dunedin in 1936.

introduced McCahon to Woollaston in 1937.

Mountford Toss Will Woollaston (1910–98) and Robert Nettleton Field (1899–1987)

The son of sharemilking dairy farmers, Woollaston had abandoned early any inclination towards farming in favour of a desire to be a poet. A questioning but committed Christian faith led him to consider the Anglican ministry while still in his late teens. However, an invitation to dinner after a Sunday church meeting in Riwaka (near Nelson) – where he had gone to gain seasonal orchard work – was to change the direction of Woollaston's life. His hostess, a Mrs Thomas, was a member of Nelson's Suter Sketch Club, and the watercolours Woollaston saw in her house opened for him a whole new world. After initial lessons from Mrs Thomas and Hugh Scott, a local artist, Woollaston sought more formal instruction – first at the Canterbury College School of Art in Christchurch and subsequently at the School of Art of Dunedin's King Edward Technical College, where he became a pupil of Robert Nettleton (R.N.) Field.

Field, an English artist who had been imported to teach at the Dunedin school, had himself studied alongside Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth at the Royal College of Art in London. His teaching focused not on the rigid

indoctrination of theories or technique but, rather, on encouraging his students in the development of their own ideas. As had Woollaston before him, McCahon was later to find Field an inspirational teacher.

Although Field was one of the few in New Zealand who understood the ideas of Cézanne, this knowledge did not lead to a radical change of form or expressive colour in his own work. He considered the question of depth as one of the key issues of pictorial composition, taking from Cézanne the principle that each part of a picture is essential to every other part in a well-ordered scheme.

Commencing in the early 1930s, and largely through the auspices of Field and his circle, Woollaston became aware of the beginnings of Modernism. As was to be the case with McCahon, it was through reproductions of the works of Cézanne and the Fauves, in magazines such as *The Studio* and the *Illustrated London News*, that these new artistic frontiers were opened to Woollaston. (Only in the 1960s did he travel to Europe and the United States to see the works themselves.)

Later, around 1934, the painter Flora Scales – who had studied in 1931 at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Art in Munich – introduced Woollaston to the teachings of Hofmann (1880–1966). Through an analysis of space based on Cézanne, and the use of flat areas of colour, Hofmann had developed a system whereby images were composed using a scheme of overlapping and rotating planes – in so doing rejecting the traditional linear Renaissance perspective. Hofmann was also important for Woollaston in another respect. Reflecting ideas rooted in Goethe and the German metaphysical tradition, Hofmann stated that art leads back

to a profound religious feeling because art itself is the expression of that feeling. Thus every vista could be a glorification of deity. This was an affirming revelation to Woollaston, who had himself come to see painting in spiritual dimensions.

Throughout the span of his career Woollaston continued to conceive of painting as operating within a two-dimensional sphere. His work – mostly landscapes that sought to express emotions called forth by the New Zealand countryside, and figure studies – is characterised by a lack of concern for one-point perspective and atmospheric or spatial continuity. Construction of pictorial space within a Woollaston painting relies largely on an expressionist use of contrasting colour. In his late work, the emphasis is on the placement of strokes and marks that, although imprecise, create the suggestion of forms.

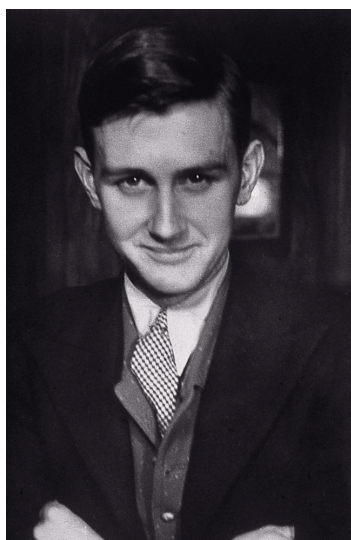
Woollaston was knighted in 1979 for his services to painting, the only New Zealand artist to be thus honoured.

1937–39

During these years McCahon attended the Dunedin School

of Art as a part-time student, spending winter in the school and summer working in the tobacco fields and apple orchards of Nelson.

'I went to the Dunedin School of Art for some parts and to Nelson to work for other parts of these few years. I spent six months of one year on the road with a revue company (advance publicity and dirty comedian). Met Woollaston, Rodney Kennedy, R.N. O'Reilly and Charles Brasch, Eve and Fred Page, Hilda and Mario Fleischl, all my early supporters – and my wife, painter Anne Hamblett and our friend Doris Lusk. John Summers was another Dunedin friend. Bob (R.N.) Field was teaching in Dunedin at this time. He was a kind



Colin McCahon, aged about eighteen years (c. 1936–37).
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

and good teacher.'¹⁸

In either 1938 or 1939 McCahon also visited Auckland in search of work, recalling later 'I wanted to see what Auckland looked like....I could have bought myself several thousand acres of grapes for almost nothing if I'd had the almost nothing....I found it so flat, I couldn't take it. There was no jobs, nothing to do – it was the real end of the Depression.'¹⁹

McCahon achieved positive results from his art school experience, with one of the teachers, Gordon Tovey, recommending that he should 'if possible, continue his studies overseas'.²⁰ The outbreak of World War II prevented this from happening.

It was a varied group who formed McCahon's circle. Apart from the poet Charles Brasch, and his partner Rodney Kennedy – a painter who spent most of his life working in theatre and who became McCahon's life-long supporter – the group included Toss Woollaston, and the librarian Ron O'Reilly, who was to organise several exhibitions

for McCahon. McCahon also took part in the evening gatherings held in Dunedin at the house of Clair and Arthur Prior. McCahon was attracted to the agile, philosophical mind of Prior, who was influenced by Socialism and Pacifism. After attempting to make a living from religious journalism, Prior joined the Royal New Zealand Air Force during World War II, putting to one side his Pacifist leanings in view of the greater imperative to defeat Nazism. He later became known for his ideas on Modal Logic, publishing the books *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1949) and *Time and Modality* (1957). Discussions between Prior and McCahon were taken up again in the late 1940s when McCahon moved to Christchurch, where Prior was teaching at Canterbury University College.

Later, the poet John Caselberg, who supplied McCahon with text for his paintings in the 1950s, joined the group.

In 1937 the English Phaidon Press commenced publishing a series of large-scale art books. Subjects included the French Impressionists, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Botticelli and the sculptures of Michelangelo. These books were available in the Dunedin Public Library. There McCahon also saw publications provided by the US Embassy on early 20th Century American regionalist artists such as Thomas Hart



Colin McCahon with stingray, Riwaka Wharf, c. 1938.
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

Benton (1889–1975) and John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), as well as pamphlets on other artists participating in the American Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. From May 1935 the WPA had funded public art projects – such as murals – to provide work for artists during the Depression. These publications were of great interest to McCahon, who was more attuned to the types of painting they illustrated than he was to traditional English art, with its focus on landscape and portraiture.

In late spring of 1938 McCahon and Rodney Kennedy biked to Nelson for seasonal work picking fruit and harvesting tobacco. Kennedy, having earlier introduced McCahon to Woollaston in Dunedin, arranged a visit to the latter, who was at that stage living at Mapua near Nelson. Subsequently, after the Woollastons temporarily moved elsewhere for the summer, McCahon and Kennedy moved into their house. They were joined by a group of friends including Doris Lusk, Anne Hamblett, Elespie Forsyth and Patrick Hayman. Discussion of art was a constant among



Mapua, 1939. From left: Patrick Hayman, Colin McCahon, Elespie Forsyth (later Prior), Doris Lusk and Rodney Kennedy.
Courtesy of the Doris Lusk Estate.

them. Favourite topics at the time included Cézanne, and questions about 'significant form' and plasticity. By the early 1940s the predominant influence of Cézanne and the early Cubists would be clear in McCahon's paintings. However, in the middle of that decade he started to doubt the relevance of Cézanne's ideas about composition to his own work, feeling that they were inhibiting him in his search for more 'feeling'.

Back in Dunedin for the winter term, in July 1939 McCahon helped with staging an anti-Fascist, anti-anti-Semitic theatre piece, *Professor Mamlock* by Frederich Wolf. Among his contributions to the set was a 'Bauhaus-inspired' still-life painting.²¹ Instead of being based on a standard linear perspective of converging lines, the painting, *Still-life for the play 'Professor Mamlock'*, depicts a table upon which the



Still-life for the play 'Professor Mamlock' 1939
Distemper on gesso on plywood, 71.5 x 77.4 cm
Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. John and Ethel McCahon Bequest, 1973
TCMDAIL No. 000819

objects displayed are seen from different angles.

McCahon developed a life-long interest in the theatre. His passionate conviction that art could be a means of communication, and his desire to be engaged in the life of the society in which he lived, led him to participate in the design, staging and publicity of numerous productions over the succeeding years. Often his work in theatre and set design offered McCahon the freedom to explore ideas which, if successful, he could later incorporate in his artworks. An important and significant early example of this is the large painting conceived for the set of a production of T.S. Elliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, staged in Dunedin in



Madonna with Child and Angels c. 1941
Oil on muslin, 198 x 280 cm
Private collection, Auckland, New Zealand
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)

1941. Painted by McCahon, with the assistance of Doris Lusk and Anne Hamblett, the figures of the Madonna, the Christ Child and their attendant angels are startling precursors of McCahon's Marys and angels of the mid to late 1940s.

In 1939 McCahon was, for the first time, listed as an Artist Member of the Otago Art Society, Dunedin. However, in November of that year controversy erupted over McCahon's first submissions for the Society's annual exhibition. Initially accepted and hung, the work was then rejected and removed, leading other young painters to withdraw their work in McCahon's support an hour before the exhibition was due to open. 'It was my first battle....They had done a thing encouraging young painters to join the Society....and it worked out like this.'²²

Although subsequently the painting was installed, the incident was symptomatic of the negative reactions and hostile treatment McCahon was to encounter during his life. At the same time it is also evidence that from the beginning there was always a group of dedicated supporters.

'...The Moutere hills have the formal order of good architecture....If I had passed matriculation I would have been an architect and have been more use in the world than I am now painting the architecture and the order of the world, things which are real but which people won't believe. My Art Society picture had all my ideas of architecture applied to painting worked out most fully in it and the Society thought I was joking with them....I imagined people looking at it, then looking at a landscape and for once being happier for it and believing in God and then the brotherhood of men and the futility of war and the impossibility of people owning and having more right to a piece of land than anyone else. The force of painting as propaganda for social reform is immense if properly wielded....Communism it is said stamps out Christianity[.] Christianity as now practised it does stamp out, but true Communism means true Christianity and I believe that by my painting I help to bring it about.'²³

Colin McCahon continued to be listed as a member of the OAS until 1945.

The New Zealand Art Scene in the 1940s and 1950s

Until the end of the 1950s the South Island cities of Christchurch and Dunedin contained New Zealand's most active art scenes. In the twenties and thirties there had emerged in Christchurch the first traces of something like an avant-garde. Among other developments, this led to the establishment, in 1927, of an artists' exhibiting collective known as The Group. This initiative attracted members whose outlook and production was more progressive than the public galleries and museums – and the existing conservative Art Society – found acceptable. The Group stayed active until 1977.

Christchurch also had a lively University College (as part of



Colin McCahon, Fred Jones and Toss Woollaston at Mapua, 1940.
Courtesy of Mrs Connie Summers, Christchurch, New Zealand.

the University of New Zealand), as well as the Canterbury College School of Fine Arts, which was well regarded, with periods when it encouraged a fertile artistic and intellectual climate. The School of Art became a special school of the university in 1950, eventually becoming fully integrated in 1957, after which time it moved to the new campus at Ilam. Meanwhile, Dunedin's Public Library maintained one of the best collections of art books in the country throughout the thirties and forties, while the University of Otago provided a focus for an active theatre and art scene.

The first months of World War II and the start of the new decade saw McCahon undertaking summer work in the Nelson region. This was followed by a brief trip to Wellington where he visited the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition. Back in Dunedin by winter, McCahon worked for the Otago Museum constructing natural-history dioramas. Although as part of this work he encountered – and was interested in – artefacts from the Maori and other ethnic groups, his appreciation remained shaped by the Western attitude towards 'primitive art'.

At some time during this period McCahon was rejected from military service for medical reasons. Instead he worked in State-prescribed heavy industry occupations in support of the War effort and, subsequently, in orchard and harvesting work.

In September 1940 McCahon was a guest exhibitor with The Group, Christchurch, commencing an association that was to last until the late 1970s.

Summers of this period continued to be spent working on

farms and orchards in the Nelson area. In autumn 1941 McCahon was employed at a joinery factory in Wellington. Throughout the early 1940s McCahon continued to visit Woollaston, regularly discussing art and religion. Woollaston had published an article expressing his religious convictions in *Art in New Zealand*. 'The Spirit that creates Nature and Art is God. An artist must lose his dependence on his optical vision in order to find his visual vision.'²⁴

Also influential on McCahon at this time was Woollaston's uncle, Frank Tosswill. 'Uncle Frank' was a follower of Frank Buchman, an American who had founded his Moral Rearmament Movement – also known as the 'Oxford Group' – on what he defined as the four Absolute Truths: Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love. Although McCahon and Woollaston may have first encountered the movement through their Dunedin School of Art teacher R.N. Field, who was a devotee from around 1934, Uncle Frank's arrival on one of his intermittent visits was followed by a period of intense and challenging religious debate between the older man and the two young artists. Uncle Frank's baggage included blackboard signs lettered with religious texts and simple Christian symbols, as well as a large version of a diagrammatic aid to meditation that he had painted himself. This he installed on the prime wall in the Woollastons' small house, taking down his nephew's paintings in order to do so.²⁵ Although the two artists ultimately became disillusioned with Woollaston's eccentric uncle, the debates that he had precipitated forced McCahon to focus his thoughts on what it was that he really



Frank Tosswill, c. 1940. One of his diagrammatic aids to meditation is visible on the wall at upper left.
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Woollaston Estate.

believed in.

This self-examination was further stimulated by discussions on the ideas of the British sculptor/typographer Eric Gill (1882–1940). (Among other achievements, Gill was the designer of the Gill sans-serif typeface, still in use today.) McCahon had read books by Gill, including *Christianity and Art* (1927) and *Work and Property* (1937). In these, Gill – who had become a Catholic in 1913 – expressed his deeply religious convictions, emphasising the role of the artist as a craftsman and expounding on the place of art in society. According to him, true art should seek beyond the mere



Colin and Anne Hamblett on their wedding day, 21 September 1942, outside St Matthew's Anglican Church, Stafford Street, Dunedin, New Zealand.
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

imitation of things seen in nature.

1942

In September 1942 McCahon married Anne Hamblett and a few months later the couple moved to Pangatotara in the Motueka district.

Anne McCahon (née Hamblett) (1915–93)

Anne Eleanor Hamblett was born in 1915, the second child of the Reverend William Hamblett, then vicar of the Taieri Anglican Church, and his wife Ellen (née West). Four other children were born subsequently and by 1922 the family had moved in to Dunedin.

After being encouraged in art by her teachers at Otago Girls' High School, Anne Hamblett enrolled at the Dunedin School of Art in 1934 where she remained a pupil until the end of 1937. In her first year she gained a reputation as one of the school's most promising pupils, earning a scholarship to cover her fees for the following year.

In 1937 she joined the Otago Art Society, hanging four



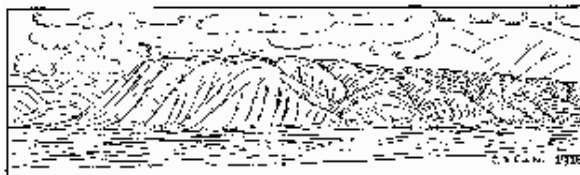
Anne Hamblett, *Poppies* c. 1938
Oil on composition board, 45.6 x 45.2 cm.
John and Ethel McCahon Bequest. Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

works in their annual exhibition of that year. Although encouraged by her father to enrol at the Dunedin Teachers Training College in 1938, Anne Hamblett had little interest in teaching as a career. Instead, she gained employment as an anatomical illustrator at the Otago Medical School. Much of her spare time she spent in a studio she shared with fellow artists Doris Lusk and Elizabeth Begg. Her style was progressively 'modern' for its time, with influences ranging from Cézanne to Van Gogh.

Four years older than McCahon, she initially determined to keep their friendship platonic:

'A pattern developed where he escorted her home from the studio to her parents' Stafford St house. The conversation was always good but when he proposed marriage the response was a resounding "No!".

'Her refusal went unheeded, however, and he bought a second-hand bracelet to mark their betrothal. She refused to wear it but his advances continued and on September 21, 1942, her father, the Rev. William Hamblett, married them in St Matthew's Anglican Church.'²⁶



Sketch of North Otago, Professor C. A. Cotton, *Geomorphology Of New Zealand*, 1922.
Courtesy of the Estate of Prof. C.A. Cotton.

Among their wedding presents the McCahons received from fellow painter Patrick Hayman a copy of Professor Charles Andrew Cotton's *Geomorphology of New Zealand*. Although an academic textbook, this volume is distinguished by its author's line drawings of different geological features, each depicted in its bare essentials, stripped of vegetation.

During this early 1940s period, drawing assumed a new importance for McCahon. The development found expression in a number of figure studies, often modelled on his wife Anne. For the first time, humans appear in McCahon's hitherto unpeopled landscapes: 'Drawing is perhaps more successful on all sides than it appears at first glance...something definitely more solid.'²⁷

Simultaneously, changes were occurring in McCahon's approach to depicting the landscape itself:

'...the ambiguity of McCahon's approach to Cézanne is also evident. The optical shift employed by Cézanne to build up an illusion of controlled spatial depth in which some colours seem to recede, others advance, is not exploited as the basis for constructing his landscapes. The spatial function ascribed to colour is virtually ignored, as if McCahon were viewing Cézanne's paintings in monochromatic terms as they would be in photographic reproductions. Rather, Cézanne's achievements are channelled through the Cubists' view of his paintings. Based on Cézanne's famous stricture: "Treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone", the Cubists applied this advice in their own paintings in a way Cézanne could never have intended.'²⁸

Now, at a distance, and knowing his exemplars only through reproduction, McCahon set about developing his own experiments.

1943

Although the newly married couple spent the summer of 1942–43 together harvesting tobacco at Pangatotara, circumstances soon contrived to separate them. From around April 1943 to the end of that year economic necessity forced Colin McCahon to live in Wellington, taking time off only to visit Anne, whose father had insisted on her return to the parental home in Dunedin to prepare for the birth of the couple's first child.

McCahon found work at the Wellington Botanical Gardens, next to which was an American military camp. During this period he witnessed an incident in which an escaping black detainee was shot down by military police. This shooting had a profound effect on McCahon, heightening his awareness of the brutality and senseless destruction of war, a state of affairs that he conceived as resulting from humanity's lack of faith: 'One person with real faith could stop the war...'²⁹

The larger crisis afoot in the world was reflected in McCahon's own struggle for meaning and his search for

spiritual values. One of several places where he sought answers was in the history of Christian art. In particular, McCahon looked closely at the work of Giotto and Michelangelo. At the same time he became interested in the symbolism and simplified forms of Gauguin.

Writing much later, in his introduction to the 1975 *Colin McCahon: 'Religious' Works 1946–52* exhibition, the curator Luit Bieringa observed:

‘To Colin McCahon the essence of Christian Art appeared to lie in its absolute honesty. It seemed that a work of Christian Art could be produced by a man not living a Christian life and that such a work need not necessarily be good art or its subject matter be religious. McCahon came moreover to the opinion that Christian Art needed to manifest the suppression of the artist’s personality in his work, that is, an utter humility before the spirit of the work. The work had to be honest and not “declaiming anything about the artist himself”.’³⁰

In July 1943 a son, William, was born, the first of four children. The family’s life was one of hardship and poverty, with Anne having to give up her own promising artistic career in order to take care of the children. Over the next few years the family was frequently split up, economic difficulties necessitating Anne and the children having to stay with various relatives – often in different cities or towns not only from McCahon himself but from one another. It was only after the move to Auckland in 1953 that the family was finally able to live together on a permanent basis.

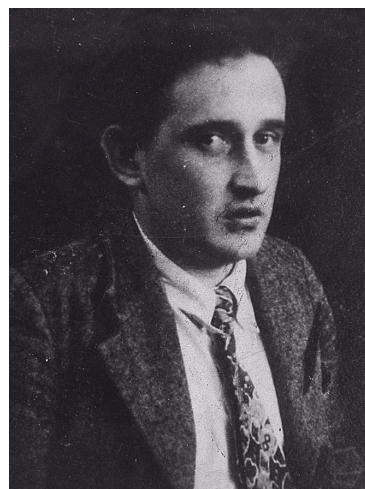
In November 1943 McCahon was again a guest exhibitor with The Group, Christchurch.

Although the subject of some conjecture,³¹ it is possible that it was during 1943 that McCahon first met the young poet James K. Baxter, most probably during a visit to the Baxter home in Brighton, south of Dunedin. McCahon had likely gone there to talk with James’ Pacifist father, Archibald. The elder Baxter was famous for his World War I experiences during which, despite being a conscientious objector, he had been forced to go to the front lines where he was subject to innumerable cruelties. His book on these experiences – *We Will Not Cease* – had been published in 1939 and quickly became the New Zealand Pacifist movement’s touchstone.

James Keir Baxter (1926–72)

James K. Baxter was a precocious young talent who had started writing poetry when he was seven years old. He had his first book, *Beyond the Palisade*,³² published at the age of eighteen. As well as poetry, Baxter was the author of a number of plays and a widely published critic. McCahon and Baxter shared a preoccupation with the theme of the land, a non-conformist approach to society, and convictions about the nature of religious belief and visionary experience.

In 1944, while a student at the University of Otago, Baxter recounts how: ‘God..., whom I had not met till then, revealed Himself to me one day when I had reached the



James K. Baxter, late 1940s/early 1950s.
Photograph by Brian Bell.

middle of a disused railway tunnel, in the grip of a brutal hangover.’³³

This visionary experience led to a life-long interest in religion. In late 1947 Baxter moved to Christchurch, intending to renew his studies at the university – but also to visit a Jungian psychologist resident there. As a result he began incorporating Jungian symbolism into his poetic theory and practice. In 1948, although a member of a prominent Quaker family from Dunedin, he was baptised as an Anglican. Baxter struggled with alcoholism, joining Alcoholics Anonymous in 1954 and eventually becoming sober. In 1958 he was re-baptised a Catholic. Shortly thereafter he left for India. On his return, ill with dysentery, he concentrated his activities on writing drama, finding in it a more suitable means for comment and criticism of the society in which he lived. In 1960 he had a celebrated argument with Allen Curnow, whose anthology, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Baxter contended perpetuated a nationalist agenda for poetry and under-represented the younger generation of poets.

In late 1968, as a result of a dream in which he heard the call ‘Go to Jerusalem’, Baxter travelled to a Maori settlement of the same name on the Whanganui River. Here he founded a community based on a fusion of Christian and Maori spiritual values. It provided a base for marginalised people – the drug-addicts, alcoholics, unemployed and homeless whom Baxter called, in Maori, his *nga mokai* (‘fatherless ones’) – and a place for sanctuary and healing. Here, in 1970, he wrote what is perhaps his best-known and acclaimed poem cycle, *Jerusalem Sonnets*.

Although in his writings Baxter criticised much of what he found wanting in New Zealand society, his commentary was neither negative nor despairing in the way of some of his contemporaries. Instead, he spoke of the need for New Zealanders to engage in a reconstruction of the social order whereby they might build a more inclusive community.

In his last years he worked among the 'down and out' in Wellington and Auckland.

1944

In this year McCahon returned to the Nelson area. Here he was again employed in tobacco fields, orchards and lime and marble factories, before shifting into the city, where he worked as a builder's labourer at Tahunanui.

Through his orchard work McCahon became acquainted with a number of Pacifists and conscientious objectors. To these men Archibald Baxter, whom McCahon had visited a year earlier, was a hero for his outspoken Pacifist commitment. McCahon's friend Ron O'Reilly suggested at that time that Communism offered similar goals to those that McCahon was searching for. But 'McCahon saw them "as a stage and not as a final state" for they were goals which fell short of the "much larger goals" of Christianity.'³⁴

At this time McCahon lived at Mapua near Toss Woollaston. Eventual differences of opinion between the two artists led



Jackson's orchard, Mapua, Nelson, early 1940s. McCahon on right.
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

to an agreement not to discuss matters of art or religion.

1945

On 30 May, a small exhibition of McCahon's landscapes opened at the French Maid Café, Wellington. As far as can be deduced, this was McCahon's first solo exhibition. During this period the influence of Cézanne on McCahon's work was waning. Within a short time the artist's handling of form and use of curved brush lines indicated that he had found a new source of inspiration in late-1920s Picasso.

In this year Dr Mario and Hilda Fleischl, early and life-long supporters, commissioned a large-scale *Otago Peninsula* landscape. The work, characterised by a crisscrossing rhythm of hill ridges, reflects McCahon's interest in the simplified landscape forms – and the volumes and weight – of such early Italian painters as Sassetta (Siena, c. 1392–1450), Gentile da Fabriano (Florence, c. 1370–1427) and Fra Angelico (Florence, c. 1387–1455).

McCahon's study of those Old Masters working at the

moment the Middle Ages turned into the Renaissance, as well as of painters such as Giovanni Bellini (Venice, c. 1430–1516), Michelangelo (Florence/Rome, c. 1475–1564) and Titian (Venice, c. 1485–1576), led him to emphasise modulations of light and dark tones in his paintings, rather than rely solely on colour. He studied the composition and mathematical approach of the 'Golden section', an idea based on the use of numbers as an ordering principle, and of geometric figures to establish proportion and symbolic content. This approach, which attempted to combine traditional concepts with modern painting, was without precedent or parallel in New Zealand art. Yet for McCahon,



Colin McCahon and Anne Hamblett, *Landscape with Trains, Boats and Cars*
1944

Watercolour and ink on paper, 27 x 37 cm.

Courtesy of Dunbar Sloane Ltd, Wellington, New Zealand
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)

everything he took from these historical examples had to be relevant to his current situation.

In August, and again in November, he and Anne held exhibitions at Modern Books, Dunedin, showing *Pictures for Children* – images they had drawn and painted together as a way of earning some money. As opposed to being simply illustrations of children's stories, each of the McCahons' paintings was a picture in its own right.

In 1945 the first *Yearbook of the Arts* in New Zealand was published. McCahon's paintings appeared in each of the annual editions published between 1945 and 1951 when the publication ceased.

1946

From the end of 1946 until the early 1950s McCahon's drawings and paintings reflected his interest in religious art. Selecting his subject matter from popularly-known biblical events and stories, he reinterpreted them in settings of contemporary New Zealand landscapes, putting emphasis on the spiritual and human values implicit in each scene. A Medieval style – which, with its flat areas of colour, heavy contours, and a lack of one-point perspective or realistic

representation, recalled Romanesque frescoes – was a conscious choice to reach his public. Interestingly, this was a style also favoured by Georges Rouault, with whose work McCahon developed an affinity. In another change which took place during this period, McCahon's confidence with the landscape allowed him to abandon the use of preliminary drawings, instead relying solely on memory to capture the essence of his subject.

Towards the end of 1946 McCahon completed *I Paul to you at Ngatimote* 1946 (page 67), the first painting in which he placed a cast of biblical characters in the New Zealand countryside. Although the landscape itself is not paramount in the painting, the titling of the work specifically situates the biblical disciple Paul in a particular New Zealand locale, a farming community on the east bank of the Motueka River near Nelson. By choosing Ngatimote – the correct spelling of which is actually Ngatimoti, and which translates as 'belonging to' or 'place of' Timothy in Maori – McCahon alludes to Paul's Letters to Timothy in the New Testament.

In this year Gordon Tovey, with whom McCahon had studied in Dunedin, was appointed National Supervisor of Arts and Crafts. A significant feature of Tovey's directorship was his promotion of the idea that Maori art was on a par with art produced by New Zealanders of European ancestry. This recognition contributed to an already growing interest in Maori culture.

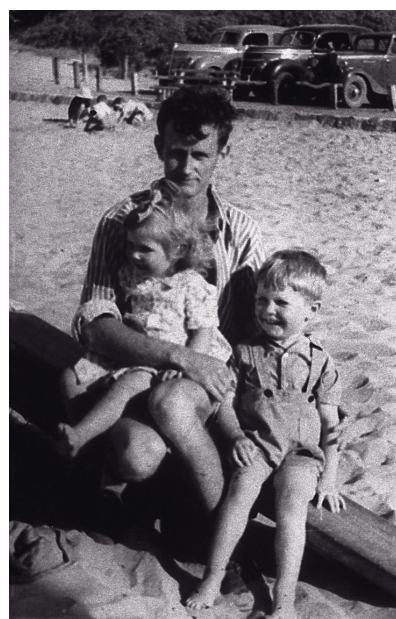
1947

In 1947 McCahon moved from Tahunanui into the centre of Nelson. This year was to be one of intense painting activity, culminating in the first display of his new 'religious' works at Modern Books in Dunedin in July–August. Themes favoured were common biblical ones with easily recognisable symbols – Entombments, Annunciations, Mother and Child Portraits, Depositions, The Marys at the Tomb, Bread and Wine, and Lamps.

In November he again exhibited with The Group, Christchurch, showing some of the paintings from the Modern Books exhibition along with his first *Crucifixion*. This year he became a full member of The Group, exhibiting with them regularly until 1977, when this artists' association was dissolved.

Recalling 1947, McCahon wrote:

'Trips to Dunedin and Wellington. The wonderful gift of the Phaidon Press in revealing Titian. Lots of painting. We were at Tahunanui and I was in the building trade. We had a Christmas in a very small house full of people painting and talking: the (Lusk) Hollands, Betty O'Reilly, Pat Hayman.... the conversation was endless....Three paintings [*The entombment after Titian* 1947 (page 13); *Christ taken from the Cross* 1947; *The Angel of the Annunciation* 1947 (page 68)] are from this time. They were shown later in Wellington [1948]... John Beaglehole opened the exhibition in the Wellington



Colin McCahon with Catherine and William, Nelson, New Zealand, c. 1947.
Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

Public Library. Really my first big exhibition.'³⁵

One feature much commented on in the Modern Books exhibition was McCahon's use of speech balloons. Although in a general way influenced by the example of comic books, McCahon wrote that the specific idea was taken 'from a Rinso [soap powder] packet....The use of legend with space composition could be very telling'.³⁶ Besides the use of speech balloons – unheard-of in 'real' art, as opposed to cartoons – the works were characterised by a 'roughness' of execution, stylised figures with heavy contours, no shadows and flat colour.

Several of the images were based on McCahon's memory of Renaissance paintings he had seen in books and chosen for their existential human meaning. Equally, people, places and incidents observed in McCahon's daily life functioned as triggers. To use but one example, a power-line repairman observed climbing a telegraph pole became a figure climbing a ladder leaned against the Cross in *Crucifixion* (For Rodney Kennedy) 1947 (page 70).

Charles Orwell Brasch (1909–73)

From an affluent family, Brasch was able to live on private means and travel widely. He is best known for his poetry and for *Landfall*, the quarterly magazine dedicated to writing, poetry and the visual arts which, together with Denis Glover, he founded in 1947 and edited until 1966. Brasch had a significant effect on how the arts in New Zealand developed, with *Landfall* becoming a mouthpiece for the assertion of a

national identity in arts and letters.

Writing to McCahon of the Modern Books exhibition, Brasch commented:

'It is my difficult task to write you about your new paintings, & indeed I have rather fought shy of coming to grips with them....very few people have made comments on them; which may be due to a combination of the disturbing subjects & your unconventional treatment of them....they raise a whole series of questions which most of us spend our lives avoiding, therefore we tend to turn away from them. For my part I was held up first because there seemed to be a breakaway in style from earlier works of yours; now I see they are less so than I thought....The one which impresses me most is the larger Deposition [*Entombment after Titian* 1947]; the Deposition with the flying angel [*Christ Taken from the Cross* 1947] I like less because the angel seems to be in a different style & seems also rather to overshadow the central group. The Annunciation [*The Angel of the Annunciation* 1947] repelled me somewhat at first, but each time I see it I feel more drawn towards it, although I think the ugly lettering in the corner is a blot...'³⁷

In reply, McCahon responded:

'The Annunciation [*The Angel of the Annunciation* 1947] pleases me very much, the colour blue & yellow sings most suitable music for the occasion. The hills & river landscape [*Matai Valley*] was the beginning of all recent work so I am fond of it for that—it solved the years-old problems of Nelson hills. All the other painting depends on it. *The King of Jews* [page 72] I don't know about myself...'³⁸

Meanwhile, James K. Baxter also wrote of his reactions to the new work, particularly *Crucifixion according to St Mark* 1947 (page 69):

'While I was at Rodney's this weekend I saw your Crucifixion painting. It struck me greatly. Not that I am a competent critic of style; but this I found very moving. A Presbyterian rather than a Catholic occurrence. I mean – rawness, Christ suffering, not Christ triumphantly Son of God. The tags of speech are surprisingly successful, recalling (a) cartoon strips and (b) stained glass windows, though there one usually sees only the names of saints.

'There are many associations. Huxley's heroine who makes a caricature of her father, a slum minister, being crucified by boy scouts. Something of Grünewald also, if I remember rightly. The thunderbolt impressed me most of all, since I had not so long ago a highly charged dream where a cloud did something similar. The dividing flannels of flame, the almost Noah's ark quality of the church. And Mary (I take it to be) with her upturned stony face – a farm woman?

'All this just says I was moved by the painting for my knowledge is not complete enough for any very adequate remarks. I think you put onto canvas something I know about N.Z., but have not learned to say. The raw vitality

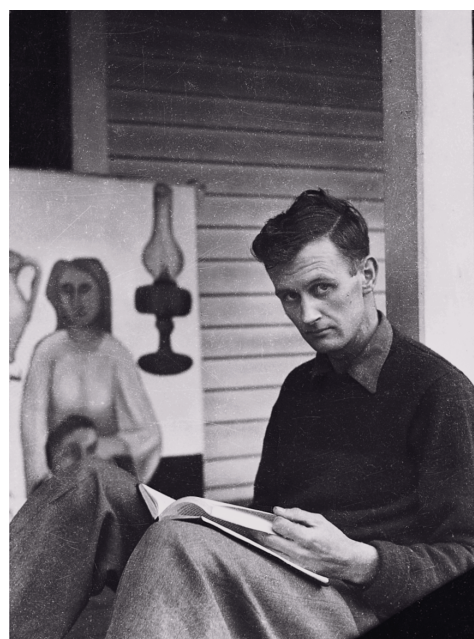
and brutal simplification. It is best suited for treatment with a brush, because colours and shapes are in it. I mean – the sailors in the wharf pub as opposed to the post office employees' general meeting.

'To my eye, most of the N.Z. paintings I see are competent drawing, smooth and maiden's watery, no attempt to work out the love and resentment (or pity, rather) which one can[']t avoid feeling whenever one meets another person. The keynote is really a modernised sentimentality, not even the good old slush....Have thought of joining the Catholics – they at least do not ignore pain or despair.'³⁹

1948

Early in the year McCahon moved to Christchurch where he boarded with the Hollands (the painter Doris Lusk and her new husband Dermot Holland), and worked as a gardener. During February his paintings – forty-two landscapes and figurative religious works – were exhibited at the Wellington Public Library, some of the paintings subsequently being displayed at the Lower Hutt Public Library. The exhibition was organised by Ron O'Reilly, who later wrote:

'...you are generalising the N.Z. landscape as it has never been generalised – this is not Pangatotara or Tahunanui or the Dunedin hills but New Zealand and its feeling of familiarity and generality is legitimate only because you are not concerned (any longer) to give a portrait of a place, but on the contrary to use some things known to furnish your



Colin McCahon, Christchurch, December 1948. Behind him can be seen *The Virgin and Child compared* 1948 (page 73). TCMDAIL No. 000825. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive. Photograph by Theo Schoon.

new world.’⁴⁰

But this support of a few was outweighed by the negative reaction of many viewers:

‘...the paintings of Colin McCahon seem to us a bastard product of a misalliance between William Blake and Georges Rouault, though we must admit that the lavatory bowl in the



Crucifixion with Lamp 1947
Oil on hardboard, 75.6 x 90.6 cm
Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
Gift of Charles Brasch
TCMDAIL No. 000837

“King of Jews” is pure McCahon....owes it to the Harpic ads
....some of the ugliest figures ever seen...’⁴¹

The most savage attack on McCahon’s paintings came from an unexpected quarter – the well-known critic and poet A. R. D. Fairburn. Writing about the 1947 Group Show in the fifth issue of Charles Brasch’s *Landfall*, Fairburn fumed:

‘It is, I think, fairly obvious that Mr McCahon (a man of talent) is trying to get away from the sort of dullness I was complaining about a moment ago. The motive is an excellent one; the mode of escape not so admirable. The home-spun pretentiousness of these drawings distressed me. Even though they successfully avoid all the vices of the genteel style of painting, they substitute no virtues that can be perceived with the naked eye. In design, in colour, in quality of line, in every attribute of good painting, they are completely lacking. Is it possible they have a meaning not to be picked up by the naked eye? Have they some religious revelation for us? I can only say, I suspect not. They might pass as graffiti on the walls of some celestial lavatory – but that is about all. Pretentious hocus of this kind is bad for the politics of art. It gives the philistines a rod to beat the backs of those painters who want to escape from the encircling gloom of the Academy by other and more legitimate means.’⁴²

McCahon was unprepared for such hostile reactions. He didn’t doubt himself as a painter but felt that he had failed in getting his message across.

In an earlier letter to Brasch (December 1947) McCahon had written of his plans for the future:

‘...some painting to be done Hutt & Petone way. That is magnificent country. Large & very simple it can be made. After that how good to come to Dunedin & see the so lovely colour of the Peninsula & the shape of it. Am having my periodic feelings these days that at last I could do a picture worthy of the subject. How work tires one & restricts painting. God I’m sick of it[.] am busting with the glory of paint & here I am so tired I can only write foolish letters & paint only a smallest bit of the work I am capable of.’⁴³

Now he began a new series of works in which he rendered the New Zealand landscape in a manner that transcended the particulars of location, bringing him closer to his early vision of ‘a land of calm orderly granite’.⁴⁴ This new sense of order is evident in *The Promised Land* 1948 (page 71). McCahon now opened the possibility for his landscapes to be the subject of symbolic interpretation rather than a naturalistic representation of a specific place. In so doing, he found sympathy for his aims among a few of the small band of those who professed themselves ‘art critics’ in 1940s New Zealand. At that time nearly all such people were connected with the literary magazine *Landfall*, and – almost without exception – were not, in fact, specifically trained as art critics. More typically, they were literary critics and/or poets.

In the title of *The Promised Land* McCahon expresses an attitude towards the country that was shared by many of these critics who, in their nascent nationalism, saw New Zealand itself as a kind of Promised Land. Implicit in this view was the romantic notion that, as Moses had led the Jewish people to their Promised Land, so ‘empty’ New Zealand could be a Promised Land to British settlers. In the post-World War II era of increased migration from the British Isles and, to a lesser extent, Europe, this possibility seemed more relevant than ever. An associated analogy drawn from this title was that of the artist (any artist, but in this case McCahon) as a prophet – one able to lead or point out the way New Zealand was supposed to be seen. McCahon actually shows himself in *The Promised Land*, workman-like in his black singlet. An angel hovers above the scene, announcing the title and conveying its implications.

Although writing specifically of *Takaka: night and day* 1948 (page 174), McCahon’s comments apply equally to his other landscape works of this period:

‘Once more it states my interest in landscape as a symbol of place and also of the human condition. It is not so much a portrait of a place as such but is a memory of a time and an experience of a particular place.’⁴⁵

He had expanded on these ideas in an earlier letter to Ron O’Reilly:

‘I have read somewhere very recently of the monotony of



Takaka: night and day 1948
Oil on canvas laid down on board, 91.5 x 213 cm
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand.
Presented by the Rutland Group, 1959
TCMDAIL No. 001361

the N.Z. landscape. To the casual observer certainly – I know that monotony. That picture [*Triple Takaka* 1948, TCMDAIL No. 000988] is of just that but it is the same monotony that people first listening to Bach feel – a monotonous music but one when you listen with much form and order & lovely variations[. It] isn't really monotonous at all and is not one landscape but this one and a continuation of it. That picture I like as well as any of the new work, it has just the stillness & quiet of parts of this land I so love....

'I am most pleased you like the St Mark Crucifixion. [*Crucifixion according to St Mark* 1947 (page 69)]. It is the sum of all the others without their academic residues. It has there come clear. The words [saying] "My God why hast thou forsaken me" seem to me to show a despair quite unlike the interpretation of churchmen. The thought of resurrection & redemption is quite gone – not quite gone, it is there turned towards the people around the cross. It is a terrible moment. St Mark's version is the most stark & cruel I think, right from the betrayal to the end...' ⁴⁶

In 1948 McCahon was introduced to the poet John Caselberg by James K. Baxter, who had known Caselberg from his student days at Otago University. McCahon and Caselberg remained friends until McCahon's death in 1987. Both men shared an interest in religious subjects, as well as an admiration for the writings of William Blake, the early 19th Century mystic poet.

McCahon involved himself in the life of the Christchurch arts community, on occasions confidently speaking out to defend his fellow artists. Although already subject to a lamentable history of mistreatment by the conservative forces of the New Zealand arts establishment, McCahon's works were not the only ones subject to censure. In 1948, controversy erupted after the British Council sent

six paintings by the recently deceased expatriate artist Frances Hodgkins to the Canterbury Society of Arts for possible acquisition. Yet although Hodgkins's position in the pantheon of modern British painters had been confirmed by a major retrospective exhibition in London in 1946, this was not sufficient for the CSA to consider her work worth acquiring. Instead, the council of the Society decided against the purchase of any of the works, deeming that such a move would be inappropriate and that it could use its funds 'more wisely'. ⁴⁷ In response, McCahon wrote to the Press:

'Sir,— It does happen that every now and again in this country some independent spirit dares to create something new, and in doing so, disturbs the peace of the dead. Once it was so with Frances Hodgkins, and it is so even now. The dead are still, and always, with us; expect no more from them than decay and fear of life, not appreciation and not thankfulness. The dead are unaware of the flower growing above them, so can we expect more from the Canterbury Art Society than we receive, the smell of death. Can we expect the dead to be alive to the worth of Frances Hodgkins's paintings. We ask too much. —Yours etc., Colin McCahon.' ⁴⁸

A determined campaign by a group of supporters of Hodgkins' work, including McCahon, eventually led to the purchase of the painting *Pleasure Garden* by public subscription. After several attempts to force the Christchurch City Council to accept the work for the collection of the council-run Robert McDougall Art Gallery, *Pleasure Garden* was finally acquired in 1951.

1949

In 1949 McCahon exhibited twice with the Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington – first, in August, in a solo exhibition,



Installation view of the joint McCahon/Woollaston exhibition at Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington, August 1949. The McCahon images are, from left: an unidentified Crucifixion; **Crucifixion** 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 000827); an untraced landscape (possibly the image referred to as **Night and Day** in an unpublished review manuscript by Ron O'Reilly, held in the Helen Hitchings Gallery papers, although this reference may also be to **Takaka: night and day**); **Saint Veronica** 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 000663); and **Takaka: night and day** 1948 (TCMDAIL No. 001361). On the sideboard is an unrecorded image of Christ's face on St Veronica's handkerchief. This may be an early state of **Ecce Homo** 1949 (TCMDAIL No. 001606).

and again later as part of a joint exhibition with M.T. Woollaston. Subsequently, a selection of works from this latter exhibition was shown in Auckland. Although Hitchings was the first dealer to open a gallery after the lean years of World War II, her enterprise was short-lived, closing in 1951.