

## CHRONOLOGY,PART 3: 1960 TO 1969

### THE 1960S

‘At this time the family, and Colin in particular, experienced various real and perceived persecutions by parts of the Titirangi community that made life difficult. Colin soon after shifted us all into the then slums of Newton Gully where no one cared what he did or painted...so [rendering him] free of thoughtless criticism and angers.’<sup>104</sup>

In March 1960 the McCahons moved from French Bay to Partridge Street in the central Auckland suburb of Grey Lynn. It was a relief to swap the pressures of being a visible presence in a small community for the relative anonymity of an inner-city locale dominated by light industry. Perhaps reflecting the urbanised nature of his new environment, the natural landscape became less dominant in McCahon’s work of the 1960s – although his output in this decade still included several important landscape series. Principal among these were the *Landscape theme and variations* and *Northland paintings* of 1962–63, the *Waterfalls*, *Small landscapes* and *Headlands* of 1964–65, and the series of *North Otago landscapes* of 1967–68. But the distinguishing feature of these 1960s images was the generalised nature of the landscapes – rarely, now, were they depictions of a specific place – and, more importantly, the employment of the landscape for its symbolic content. Roofs of inner-city factories became shifting planes in the *Gates*; abstractions of Northland’s curved hills provided a milieu for the questioning lament ‘Was this the Promised Land’; waterfalls became symbols of light cutting through darkness and, by

extension, good cleaving evil; and the spare, pared-back hills of North Otago became Stations on the Via Dolorosa.

## 1960

The year 1960 was a fallow one in respect of painting; the McCahon Data and Image Library lists only three works with this date. Instead, McCahon spent time settling into the new house and establishing, as best he could, a small studio in a shed in the back yard: '...a hell of a lot of work was produced there (the worse the conditions the better the work).'<sup>105</sup>

In April 1960 three works from the *Elias* series were among six paintings by McCahon included in the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition, *Contemporary New Zealand Painting and Sculpture* – the first time that paintings from this groundbreaking series had been shown in Auckland. Combined with the furore that surrounded his receipt, jointly, of the Hay's Art Prize, in August 1960, the effect was to focus controversy on McCahon in a way even he had not previously experienced.

## 1961

The pause in painting that marked 1960 was soon replaced, in early 1961, by a period of intense activity. McCahon's defining iconographic image of this period was that of the

'Gate' – a 'way through' the space between two or more solid, yet shifting, planes. The tension arises from the implicit sense that at any time these impediments might block the passage. These 'Gates' gave their name to a significant body of paintings from 1961–62.

With hindsight it is possible to see a continuum from the final images of the *Titirangi/French Bay* series, such as *Pohutukawa tree, tide out* 1958 (TCMDAIL No. 000840), with its large diamond shapes floating in space, through works such as *Painting* 1958 (TCMDAIL No. 000934), *Rocks are for*



*Pohutukawa tree, tide out* 1958  
Oil on board, 60.5 x 44.5 cm  
Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.  
Gifted by Charles Brasch, 1969  
TCMDAIL No. 000840



*Painting from the Northland series* 1961  
Oil on hardboard, 59.7 x 44.3 cm  
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington,  
New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001021

*building with* 1958 (TCMDAIL No. 001227), and *Fish Rock* c. 1959 (TCMDAIL No. 000127). In each of these paintings, solid forms either float within an ambiguous pictorial space or appear to intrude into the painting from beyond its margins. Similarly, the rectangular shafts of light and triangular shapes in *He calls for Elias* 1959 (page 85) find later echoes in the *Gate* paintings. But perhaps the most direct precedent of the imagery that was to typify the *Gates* can be found in *Painting from the Northland series* 1961 (TCMDAIL No. 001021). In this work, two triangular shapes – opposite, equal and of indeterminate nature – impinge on a spare, reduced landscape.

*Here I give thanks to Mondrian* 1961 (page 91) was the first painting in which McCahon fully explored his new imagery:

'Not long before this picture was painted the family left our

house in Titirangi to come to live in the city....The painting reflects the change I felt in shifting from Titirangi with its thick native bush and the view of French Bay to that of the urban environment. This picture belongs to a whole lot of paintings that were, believe it or not, based on the landscape I saw through the bedroom window. This also applies to the *Gate* paintings and it shows the remarkable change that happened in my paintings from what I had been doing at Titirangi to what I did in town...

'The words "Here I give thanks to Mondrian" reflect my admiration for the gentleman. It was only at this stage did I realise his importance as a painter. I had seen some early works in San Francisco, and also some of his later works in other parts of the States. What really impressed me was that, although they were often very small, they had an openness and scale that extended beyond the actual edges of the painting – a thing I find only happens in front of the originals and which cannot be seen in reproduction. This effect, and also the way in which they are painted, is incredibly subtle.

'Originally all the straight lines in this picture were done with masking tape but I had some trouble with this method and they later had to be done by hand.'<sup>106</sup>

*Here I give thanks to Mondrian* is distinguished by an expansiveness in the composition, suggesting that the subject it depicts is part of a greater 'whole' extending beyond the frame.



McCahon in the upstairs attic studio, Auckland City Art Gallery, c. 1961. On the easel is *The Launching Base, Dawn* 1954 (TCMDAIL No. 000644). Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

McCahon was interested in the paintings of Malevich and the Russian Suprematists and, like Malevich, he was fascinated by the Russian icon. These small paintings, usually placed high on a wall, were attractive to him because of their strong spiritual content and power. Likewise, Mondrian's proposals for transcending the local and earthly in order to occupy a cosmic and spiritual realm – a utopian aspiration shared by many early 20th Century philosophers – coupled well with McCahon's involvement with his surroundings. At the same time, McCahon saw in Mondrian the rejection of the Renaissance idea of a painting as a window.



McCahon in early 1961 with *Moss* 1956 and *Gate* c. 1961. (TCMDAIL Nos 001383 and 000920). Photograph by Bernie Hill.

'Mondrian, it seemed to me, came up in this century as a great barrier – the painting to END all painting. As a painter, how do you get around either a Michelangelo or a Mondrian. It seems that the only way is not more "masking-tape" but more involvement in the human situation.'<sup>107</sup>

'All the various gates I opened and shut at this time [1961] were painted with reference to problems the painter Mondrian had struggled with in his work and I had now to confront too. How to make a painting beat like, and with, a human heart. All his later paintings did this and I had to find out how...'<sup>108</sup>

The body of work known as the *Gate* series (pages 90, 93, 195–197) can be divided into two groups. In the first are the single panel paintings entitled, variously, *Gate* – often with a numerical distinguisher ('10' or '15') or a descriptive subtitle ('black diamond, white square' or 'upper corners off') – along with the works in two series of smaller paintings titled *Tablet* and *Sketch*. Although the majority of these paintings were produced in a standard rectangular format, a few, including *Gate: Waioneke* 1961 (page 90) are shaped with semi-circular tops similar to church windows. McCahon relates that this came 'from thinking how good it would be to paint the walls of the Auckland Town Hall. *Gates all round*.'<sup>109</sup> Alone in the second category is the 16-panel painting known as *The Second Gate Series* (pages 196–197).



The materials McCahon chose for all the paintings were a hard gloss lacquer and a variety of the new commercially prepared household paints – mostly in subdued tones of black, grey, a pale ochre and white, and sometimes with sand mixed in – painted on pre-cut hardboard.

‘The *Gate* paintings are about creating ways through and beyond the flat painted surface of the canvas, and about humanity’s need for a way through the huge obstacles to peace posed by greed for the power of nuclear weapons. McCahon’s symbolism is enigmatic, but sure. The *Gates* can be small spaces between huge dark forms through which we must squeeze; or light spaces surrounded by darkness which presses in on them. Darks also can be fathomless depths of space through which we might fall. The paintings communicate an almost vertiginous sense of swinging, whirling movement, of the push and struggle of opposing forces. Yet these are not simplistic polarities. Dark and light areas can merge with each other, push past each other leaving traces of their presence. References to landscape forms are here too, and to movement in the landscape. The crash of the sea around a headland eroding and changing its shape, or the measured drift of tectonic plates across the earth’s surface...

‘They appear to be formal, nearly “abstract” paintings. For McCahon however, they were identified with the notion of great obstructions, especially the fear of the atomic bomb and the hope for a “way through”.’<sup>110</sup>

In each of the *Gates* McCahon pursued a two-fold objective. In technical terms he explored his ideas about abstraction and, in particular, the challenge he had posed himself of how he might bring another dimension to the two-dimensional picture plane. The source of the *Gate* paintings’ structure lay in the ideas and precedents of Braque, Gris and Mondrian, which, as we have seen, had already fascinated McCahon for some years. The opposition of dark forms and the white field – the latter representing nothingness, the space beyond, or light coming through darkness – combined with the strong diagonals, which by implication stretch beyond each painting itself, were the result of McCahon’s notion of obstructions and the possibility of ‘a way through’ the picture plane. Reflecting on Braque’s use of pictorial space, McCahon commented admiringly ‘there is nothing enclosed, there are ways through’, where ‘you can look...into infinity’.<sup>111</sup>

On a broader spiritual and philosophical level the *Gate* paintings reflected McCahon’s meditations on the world around him and, specifically, the enormous obstacles to human progress and happiness that seemed to be posed by the threat of nuclear holocaust at this time – the peak era of the Cold War – and the necessity for mankind to find ‘a way through’ these threatening situations. The structure of each image rests on the placement of rectangular shapes on the picture plane in such a way as to leave a gap between them into the pictorial space beyond. In the most successful of the paintings, McCahon uses colour, tone and contrast to achieve the optical suggestion that the rectangular shapes



*Gate* 1960–62  
Oil on canvas laid on board, 62 x 45 cm  
Private collection, Auckland, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001753

advance or recede in relation to one another.

‘These dark, formalised shapes can be likened to two converging walls which, as they move closer, restrict the area in which there is room to manoeuvre. As the two walls squeeze in upon the future of humanity, the gap that still exists between these converging walls becomes the gate that opens a way of escape from this entrapment.’<sup>112</sup>

McCahon ‘wanted his images to undulate in relation to the painting’s surface, and to radiate out so that the so-called “background” functioned like infinity, encompassing a painting as an active force so that the image could escape the limits of its outer edges. The concepts, which gave the *Gate* meaning, were seen as functioning on a cosmic scale wherein the destiny of humanity was at stake.’<sup>113</sup>

Reviewing the first showing of the new paintings at The Gallery (later to become the Ikon Gallery) in September 1961, Wystan Curnow wrote:

‘Not only is McCahon building his compositions in a fashion quite alien to that of previous works, he is turning attention from the New Zealand scene to the world scene; from man in empty, rather inhospitable country to man in empty





**The First Bellini Madonna** 1961–62  
Enamel on hardboard, 121.9 x 90.6 cm  
Jennifer Gibbs Trust, Auckland, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 000256

inhospitable space.

‘Here, as in his more successful landscapes, symbol is wedded to composition to create images of maximum power. These pictures have no obvious horizon, without which there can be no clear sensation of orthodox perspective, of the static Renaissance ordering of the world. They lack a cohesive centre and they deny the frame; forms leap from the canvas, or move out of it or into it. In fact the effectiveness of these symbols rests largely on their movements. Gates that open and shut, that fly out from, that orbit around in space. Their movement tends to burst the picture and surround the viewer.’<sup>114</sup>

Following close upon the first group of *Gates* was another series of five paintings collectively known as the *Bellini Madonnas*. As the title implies, in these works McCahon revisited the works of his much-loved Giovanni Bellini

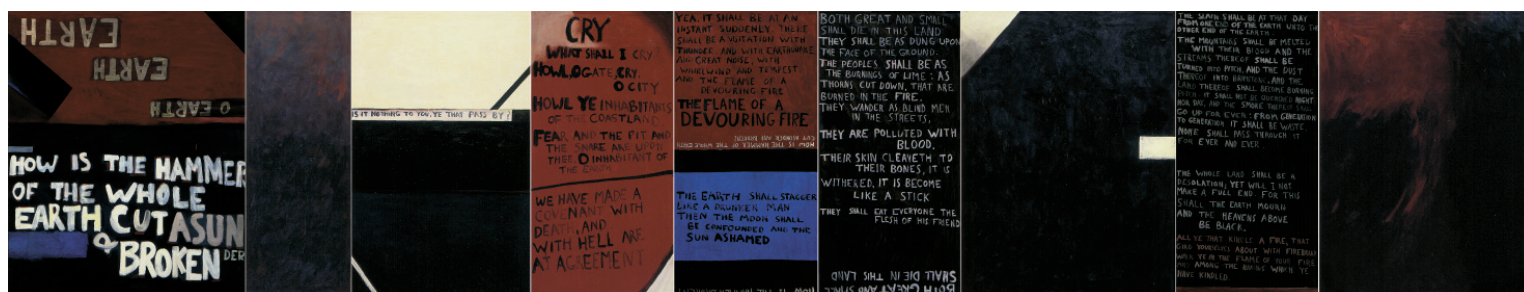
(c. 1430–1516). Extrapolating from certain compositional structures in favourite images by Bellini, McCahon explored the possibilities they offered to address his ongoing challenge to introduce a third dimension to the two-dimensional picture plane – again, to see if they offered him the solution to finding ‘a way through’. Allied to the *Gates* by similar technical and stylistic concerns, the *Bellini Madonnas* are in colour and tone quite different – dark reds and sky blues. William McCahon recalls:

‘The inspiration for the *Bellini Madonna* series resulted from Colin undergoing religious instruction within the Catholic Church, c. 1959–62. These attempts at a Marian subject reflected the huge difficulty he was having with the notion of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, which was at odds with his background of Presbyterian and Quaker philosophies. Ultimately he was asked to submit to the authority of the Church by swearing belief in the Marian concept, a commitment normally only required of priests who take confession. Colin could not do so and his religious training ceased.

‘Colin loved Bellini and for some years kept a small colour reproduction of the *Portrait of the Doge Leonardo Loredan* where he could look at it every day. He also considered Bellini a good bedtime or children’s picture book.

‘*The First Bellini Madonna (second version)* 1961 (page 92) is a reworking and synthesis of Bellini’s main compositional structures along with some of the decorative devices the Italian artist used. While Bellini employed the usual ‘implied cross’ composition of Cross and Christ symbology, he also triangulated his sub-compositions, or used a triangular overlay. His Madonnas are frequently represented structurally in pure triangular shape, falling from an apex above or on the forehead to the ground. More cognisant of Christian symbolism than most 20th Century viewers, Bellini’s original audience would have understood this to symbolize the Trinity. In all but a few paintings, Bellini further reinforced this device by also making the two upper corners in effect triangular as well.

‘In *The First Bellini Madonna (second version)* Colin uses 20th Century artistic licence to exploit Bellini’s underlying abstract compositions to the utmost. A landscape that defines the scale of the abstract figure above, bands the very bottom of the painting. The scale and perspective for this three-banded



seascape is set by a headland and reflects the numerology of the area above. Whereas Bellini makes his figures dominant by placing them prominently in front of a landscape which recedes into the distance, Colin reverses Bellini's perspective method by putting his figure behind the landscape. This "off the edge of the planet" perspective is the link to the *Gate* series.

'The confounding figure of Godhead appears partly stated above the horizon, its base on the left-hand margin and its form implying that it is an ever-repeating triangular shape. In using this form Colin acknowledged the Old Testament story of Moses to whom God showed only a part of Himself.

'The abstracted figure rising above the landscape shows two natures, one each for Christ and Mary. The black, white and gold marbling, together with the blue of the sky, represents Mary. The colours and marbling may be drawn from the colours of the dress in one of several Bellini works of the Madonna holding the Christ child on a windowsill. Christ is the area beneath. Here, in the red marbling, Christ's blood becomes a sunset, with the white light of a sunlit rainstorm below. Within the "sunset", Colin uses the "crescent moon" wound symbol that Bellini almost always used when portraying the dead Christ. The complex black area is God, the unknowable, the void. God is probably sourced from the gown of the awesome figure of God displaying His dead Son on the Cross – a detail of the *Nativity Triptych* 1460–64 held by the Venice Accademia.

'By the composition, Colin seems to be saying that Mary and Christ are part of God and the Trinity. This group is flanked by the two implied triangles that cut the top corners of some of Bellini's works. Here, the yellow one symbolizes truth revealed and the two combine with the Madonna's pure blue triangle to restate the Trinity in a third way. Bellini's marble sill is now the edge of the world and the sky beyond a new Trinity comprising God, Christ and Mary. In this one highly complex image, Colin has succeeded in paying homage to Bellini as one of his de facto teachers; extended his efforts to introduce the sense of a third dimension into the picture plane first explored in the preceding *Gate* series; and found a way to give a visual representation to the viewing of God – albeit an oblique view of one of God's many manifestations.'<sup>115</sup>

Although satisfied with the technical success of his first *Gate* paintings and the subsequent *Bellini Madonnas*, McCahon

was less confident of the extent to which these essentially geometric abstractions had succeeded in conveying his broader message. Again the problem arose – as it had on several occasions earlier in his career – as to how best address and communicate with his audience his thoughts and beliefs on the 'human situation'. In particular, the increasing antagonism of the Cold War adversaries, and the very real fear and possibility of nuclear war, troubled McCahon. Like many concerned New Zealanders at that time, he actively participated in protests such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He also addressed the issue using the vehicle he knew best – painting. To do so, however, he felt that the language of abstract shapes and colours he had employed in the *Gate* series thus far would be insufficient. Instead, as he wrote to John Caselberg in August 1961, 'I will need words':

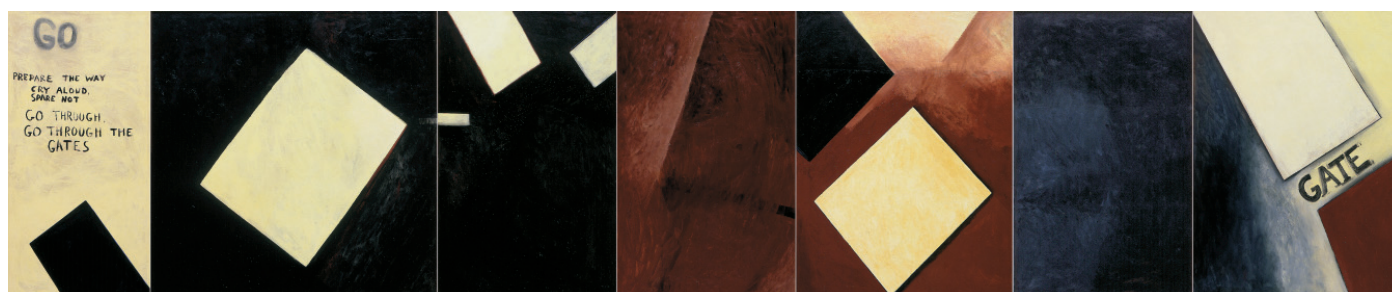
'I am becoming involved with an idea for a large-scale statement on Nuclear warfare, this to take the form of a three or even preferably four fold...screen painted both sides ending up 16ft long (32ft both sides) by 8ft high. This screen rather than a wall painting as it could stand in entrances to town halls, universities etc. (granted that such places would be interested) needing no support and possibly having the impact of a hoarding rather than a large painting only. Having developed my new painting I must make some good use of it. I will need words. The new series goes under the general title of "*Gate*" by which I mean a way through. What I want with this screen is a way through also. Words can be "terrible" but a solution must be given. In spite of a message which can burn I intend a painting in no way expressionistic but with a slowly emerging order. You probably know what I mean as you have done it. Could you supply the words – few or many – it doesn't much matter...'<sup>116</sup>

Initially Caselberg responded with suggestions based on Japanese haiku. McCahon felt that these did not fit the prescription of his planned work, although he did use these first texts in a series of drawings ten years later. Caselberg next provided a text that incorporated passages from various sources, principally the Old Testament books of Jeremiah, Isaiah and Lamentations. It was these words that McCahon

#### The Second Gate Series 1962

Enamel on hardboard, 16 panels 120.8 cm x varying widths ranging from 43.8 cm to 120.4 cm; total length 1250.5 cm.

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001001



employed.

In the event, McCahon's plans for a freestanding screen of the size and length he had written of to Caselberg did not eventuate. Instead he produced a 16-panel wall-painting, 1.2 m (4 ft) high and 12.5 m (nearly 40 ft) long. Painted on abutted hardboard panels, *The Second Gate Series* consisted – as had *The Wake* before it – of panels of text interspersed with others depicting abstract *Gate* series imagery. However, in contrast to *The Wake* and the *Elias* paintings, here McCahon used a block script to letter the texts. Colour, too, had changed from the earlier *Gate* paintings. Black, white and a creamy pale ochre were still used but to them was now added a strong red, the colour of dried blood. Work on this ambitious project occupied McCahon through the end of 1961 and into 1962.

Earlier in 1961, in May, McCahon's work was included in the *Painting from the Pacific* exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery. The unproved theory behind this exhibition was the notion that the art of the 'countries around the rim' of the Pacific with 'its ring of fire' shared certain qualities and attitudes. In November McCahon contributed works to the *Contemporary New Zealand Painting 1961* exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery – as he did to subsequent exhibitions in this series until 1966.

Away from the studio, McCahon assisted in New Independent Theatre's production of Frank Sargeson's play *A Time for Sowing*, which was mounted in the gallery. This theatre group had been founded by McCahon, Frank Sargeson and Chris Cathcart with the specific purpose of presenting New Zealand plays.

## 1962

In January 1962 McCahon presented a lecture entitled *Modern Art – The Retreat to Tradition* to the New Zealand University Students' Association Congress at Curious Cove. In it he discussed his own practice as well as analysing the history of painting from 1400 onwards. His observations on subjects as various as the function of the frame, the Impressionists, Cézanne and Diebenkorn were recorded by several participants. Their notes comprise an effective summary of McCahon's view on a range of subjects at this time.<sup>117</sup>

Returning to the studio in February, McCahon continued to explore the *Gate* theme, working on single paintings as well as refining the various panels that comprised *The Second Gate Series*. Concurrently, in his first serious experiment at incorporating an aspect of Maori culture into his work, McCahon introduced the *koru* motif, superimposing this stylisation of an unfolding fern frond on a *Gate* image in a small series of paintings collectively entitled *Koru*. The impetus to this innovation remains unclear although it is known that around this time he discussed with Caselberg the latter's Maori verse-play, *Duaterra, King*.

The *Gates* complete, they were exhibited in Christchurch's Durham Street Art Gallery in September 1962. The response from both critics and public was equivocal. With the passage of time, *The Second Gate Series*, with its searing texts and rich, brooding colour, has been recognised as one of the masterworks of McCahon's oeuvre, but the contemporary reception was unenthusiastic. Amongst the concerns raised by local critics was whether abstract painting could be expected to support texts of the power and weight McCahon had used. Only the radio commentator, Maurice Askew, seemed to understand and applaud McCahon's achievement:

'Symbols to religion are like words to speech. Symbols to an artist are his way of speaking. Malevich took the square as man's visual assertion against nature. McCahon uses the square to reaffirm this, sometimes distorting it, but always using it dynamically in a stark brutality of statement. Here are units pressing towards one another with uncontrollable strength, the slowly closing gate, the way, becoming smaller and smaller and which will close for ever if we don't move through it now.

'He has taken Mondrian's discipline, economy and humility, respecting that spiritual strength grows from denial, of shapes, of colours. From simplest means grow the strongest feeling. He's come under Mark Rothko's influence whose shapes float to the edge of the canvas where they fight against confinement and are ready, suddenly, to burst out, beyond. McCahon extends this, cutting off edges from his paintings with alcove-making patches of paint, forming shapes within shapes. These paintings, regimented on the walls of the gallery, are like mounted images in a revivalist's scrapbook – or like tombstones for a modern age. These paintings aren't for hanging on the walls of bourgeois houses. They are not for hanging in great cathedrals. But there are many corners of our world where they would live and pass on their message and grow in strength.'<sup>118</sup>

Otherwise, positive endorsement of the paintings came only from Caselberg himself. Although he can hardly be considered to be a dispassionate observer, his observations – written the following year, 1963, in his introduction to the Woollaston/McCahon retrospective exhibition catalogue – are worth repeating:

'The great *Gate* series of panels on nuclear weapons concerns the destiny of man. Because of so much newness and scalding truth and faith, we may shield ourselves from the beauty of these pictures and the call to action which all such beauty must contain. But if we ourselves work; if we inspect the paintings searchingly, patiently, fearlessly, with open minds and honest hearts, then, transported by the resounding music of their great shapes, subtle colours, space and light always encompassing the dark, beyond the cyclones of change and ruin girdling creation now towards an order man dare hardly dream of, we may by grace see.

'Only a change of heart can let mankind enter the kingdom of tomorrow. The purpose of these paintings is to change



our hearts. They offer a way through for New Zealand art as well.<sup>119</sup>

McCahon was deeply concerned about the failure of the *Gates* to communicate with his audience, concluding that although his own aesthetic aspirations were fulfilled by the abstract imagery he had developed, to pursue the ideas would only further the estrangement between himself and the public he sought to engage. Instead, he returned to the landscape, reconsidering his early *Otago Peninsula* paintings and seeking, in particular, to recapture the feeling of order that he sensed he had realised in them.

In fact the early September 1962 dating of the first *Northland* paintings would suggest that McCahon had already decided to return to the landscape before he was aware of the extent of the negative reaction to the *Gates* exhibition. But from that month until the end of the year he produced a considerable body of landscape paintings, almost all of which were given the generic title *Northland* (page 94). In fact the origins of the paintings can be found in the large suite of *Northland drawings* completed in 1959. Years later, in a statement for *Art New Zealand*, McCahon spoke of his love for the Northland landscape:

‘The real Far North of New Zealand is unlike any other part of the land. I can’t talk about it, I love it too much. From the reservoir hill above Kaitaia a flat and swampy land runs south to Ahipara and to the beach and further south a vast sandhill ends Ninety Mile Beach, gold and rounded by the wind – some scrubby manuka. Up there is like standing on the moon. Way down below is the sea and the edge of the world and the beach running to nothing and to Te Rerenga Wairua: us and a lovely old lady spaniel leaping about with joy – and nothing, nothing more – and further north when you get there – all sculpted by wind and rain it’s there – you bury your heart, and as it goes deeper into the land, you can only follow. It’s a painful love, loving a land, it takes a long time. I stood with an old Maori lady on a boat from Australia once – a terribly rough and wild passage. We were both on deck to see the Three Kings [islands off the northern tip of New Zealand’s North Island that are often the first sight of land after the sea crossing from Australia] – us dripping tears. It’s there that this land starts. The very bones of New Zealand were there, bare yellow clay-slides running to the sea, and black rock.

‘Up north the manuka hangs fiercely to the land-form. It is a protective skin, it protects the land it needs and the land gives it life and a season of red and pink and white flowering. Take the manuka and the land is lost.’<sup>120</sup>

Generalised images reflecting the ‘feel’, rather than any specific feature, of the area that gives them their name, the *Northland* paintings are distinguished by the return of a horizon line and the development of an arc-shaped hill motif. In some, a double-curve cloud lowers above the land. Each image was painted on raw canvas laid on the floor, later being stretched – but not framed – for exhibition. Technically McCahon alternated between brushwork and

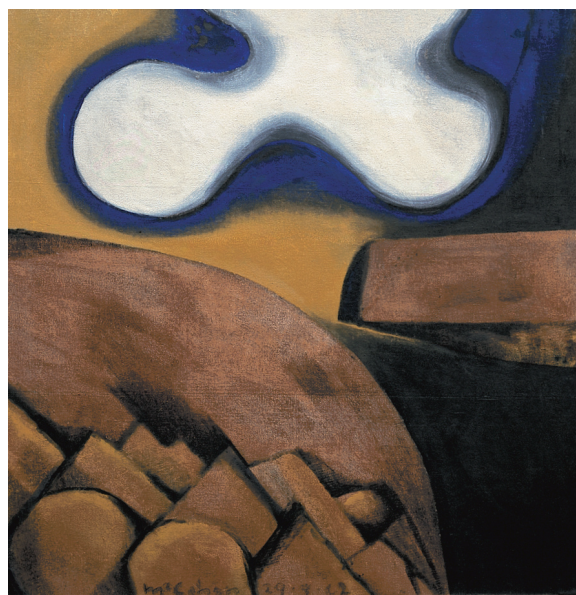
staining the canvases with thinned oil paint, the latter resulting in the subtle gradations of colour for which these paintings are renowned.

Yet as almost always is the case with McCahon, there exists another level on which these ostensibly purely landscape images work. According to his son William, McCahon was, throughout the period of the *Northland* paintings and those that followed, continuing to struggle with the problem of how to represent God that he had previously explored in the *Bellini Madonnas*. Overlaying the purely geological shape of the curved hillside, McCahon imposed the analogy of the shape as symbol of a segment of the circle which represents that part of God which He allows humanity to see. This concept was based on a passage in the Book of Exodus wherein God shows himself partially to Moses.

‘McCahon believed it was important for art to have a message and he spent his life refining his style until a mere line, a change in texture or colour, or the placement of a word, could trigger in the viewer a memory of some place, scene or time.

‘This achievement came from his ability to concentrate on the small parts of the view not usually painted by other artists – part of a hill, the edges of a cliff, a road climbing a hill face, the shoreline, and many other small pieces of landscape that the viewer did not have to specifically locate to appreciate or relate to...

‘In Christian art, Christ was seen as two Beings, human and divine. These paintings are carefully colour coded in symbolic Christian colours: purple for divinity, blue for



*Northland* 1962  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 82 cm  
Private collection  
TCMDAIL No. 001539

purity, green for growth, yellow for revealed truth, and brown for degradation.

‘Another relevant text is perhaps Exodus 33:13–23, referring to the way God will allow people to see Him only obliquely. Thus McCahon shows only the shoulders of the hills as a representation of Godhead.’<sup>121</sup>

The *Northland* imagery found its ultimate refinement in two ambitious eight-panel paintings on which McCahon commenced work in December 1962 – *Landscape theme and variations A* (page 33) and B.

## 1963

Early in 1963 McCahon completed his *Landscape theme and variations* paintings. They were first exhibited in May 1963 at Auckland’s Ikon Gallery in a radical installation where McCahon sought to create the impression of an environment within which gallery visitors found themselves enclosed.

‘In addition to the two series A and B, each containing eight unstretched canvases, making up the *Landscape Theme and Variations*, there were a number of other paintings and some unidentified drawings....There were six large unstretched canvases for the remaining walls of the gallery, referred to in a note by McCahon as “spares”. These were lettered C to I (on the reverse in pencil). *Series A* was hung on the left wall and *Series B* on the right wall, C was hung directly opposite the door. *H* and *I*, McCahon noted, were a pair. These and panels *D*, *F* and *G* were on the fire-place wall...’<sup>122</sup>

In his statement that accompanied the exhibition, McCahon wrote:

‘A Landscape is an ever-recurring theme in my painting and even when the landscape is not directly stated as such it has been implied both in form and light....With this new collection, landscape is dominant and is directly stated...; in a way these paintings represent a return to certain paintings of 1940–50. The subjects then were Nelson and Canterbury. Now the place is not stated, none of these paintings is of any actual landscape. Certainly the landscape is New Zealand but in an amalgam of both North and South. Nor is this the tourist’s landscape we so often see painted. I am dealing with the essential monotony of this land, with variations on a formal theme, and again, as in the *Northland panels* of some years ago, a “landscape with too few lovers”...’<sup>123</sup>

Later, in his 1972 survey catalogue, McCahon clarified his intentions with these paintings:

‘They were painted to be hung about eight inches from floor level. I hoped to throw people into an involvement with the raw land, and also with raw painting. No mounts, no frames, a bit curly at the edges, but with, I hoped, more than the usual New Zealand landscape meaning....I hope you can understand what I was trying to do at the time – like spitting on the clay to open the blind man’s eyes.’<sup>124</sup>

Simultaneously with the Ikon Gallery exhibition, a joint survey of the work of McCahon and Woollaston opened at the Auckland City Art Gallery. A comprehensive collection of 48 works by each of the artists, *A Retrospective Exhibition: M.T. Woollaston – Colin McCahon* later toured New Zealand. With hindsight a notable feature of this exhibition is the contrast it demonstrated between the two bodies of work. On the one hand, Woollaston, who had already developed a signature style and subject matter from which he rarely deviated for the remainder of his career; on the other, McCahon, whose exploration of different approaches and issues thus far would remain a distinguishing factor throughout the following twenty years of active painting.

In his introduction to the retrospective’s catalogue, John Caselberg – like McCahon with his *Landscape theme and variations* series – sought to ‘open the blind man’s eyes’ to the achievements of his friend:

‘At one stride Colin McCahon broke through the domestic constraints of imitatory New Zealand painting. Like William Blake, he showed that humanist conviction and religious insight together can be strong enough in any time or place to forge their own manner of art. Portraying paradise and hell, and the light and dark of our lives set in a land of such bare beauty that few of us dare look upon it, for twenty-five years he has spoken as the conscience of New Zealand.

‘His paintings in this exhibition are based on a profound study of western art....They derive, too, from an intuitive knowledge of the world as it is today revealed by modern science in so much diversity, glory and horror; and from a prophetic vision of the world as it ought to be and as it will by grace become. They thus express visual aspects of the world which we had not hitherto perceived, aspects of our human nature we usually prefer not to admit, and consequences of scientific discovery of which we had been unaware....Despite public ridicule and private scorn his work



Karekare waterfall, Waitakere Ranges, Auckland, New Zealand.  
Photograph by Charles Angel.



has never faltered...'<sup>125</sup>

Upon completion of the two *Landscape theme and variations* series in the first months of 1963, the intense period of activity that had commenced in 1961 came to a halt. It was the end of 1963 before McCahon again returned to the studio in any serious manner. Characteristically, the resulting images, grouped in series entitled, variously, *Small Landscapes* and *Headlands*, are smaller restatements of the curved hill motif developed earlier. With hindsight it is possible to see in certain of these works the genesis of McCahon's next major series, the *Waterfalls*.

## 1964



**Waterfall 1965**  
Acrylic and sand on hardboard, 68 x 65.5 cm  
Private collection, Auckland, New Zealand  
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)

'The waterfalls started flowing in 1964 and there were hundreds of them [although according to the McCahon Database and Image Library less than 100 remain]. They grew out of William Hodges' paintings on loan to the Auckland City Art Gallery from the Admiralty, London. [Hodges was the official painter on Cook's second voyage in 1772–75.] Hodges and I eventually realised we were friends over the years and got talking about his painting. He was dead and I was about the same. We conversed, through paint (about Naples yellow to start with) – and in 1964 I painted my first waterfall. Hodges is my hero in all these paintings but the Fairy Falls in the Waitakeres and Japanese and Chinese painting are the real influences later.'<sup>126</sup>

Acknowledgment is due another artist for his influence on



**Buster Black, Night II 1962**  
Enamel house paint – Samson pigment ground in oil, and ground glass, on hardboard, 60.5 x 61 cm  
Private collection, Auckland, New Zealand  
This image depicts a view of Auckland at night from the top of one of the city's volcanoes.



**Buster Black, Ngaruhoe at night 1963–64**  
Enamel house paint – Samson pigment ground in oil, and ground glass, on hardboard, 102 x 65.5 cm  
Private collection, Auckland, New Zealand



the development of McCahon's new direction. Buster Black, born of Maori parents (Ngati Maniopoto and Ngati Rangi) in Taumaranui in 1932, had joined McCahon's painting classes at the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1956. Through conversations that ranged across Christianity, music and painting, the two men became close friends and spiritual confidants, pupil and teacher influencing each other.

Early in the 1960s Buster Black had commenced a series of 'night paintings'. In some of these images pinpoints of light from cities or towns are picked out from the surrounding blackness. In others Black depicted a vision he had experienced as a 26-year-old when, looking at the volcano Ngaruhoe one night, he had seen the mountain 'cry' – exuding light that streamed and pulsed up and down its flanks while clouds rose from its base. One of six visionary experiences well-known among Maori, this spiritual – rather than physical – manifestation is traditionally held to reflect a communication from the land itself. For Black the challenge was to honour both this vision and his Christian belief and he sought to do this by portraying the experience in a Trinitarian composition.

McCahon was struck by the dramatic visuality of white light on black in these images and, equally, the effect Black had achieved by mixing fine particles of glass, sand and wood into the body of the paintings.

'*Waterfalls* fell and raged and became as still silent falls of light for a long time. I look back with joy on taking a brush of white paint and curving through the darkness with a line of white.'<sup>127</sup>

The *Waterfalls* (page 95) were first exhibited publicly at Ikon Fine Arts, Auckland, in September 1964. Once again McCahon was able to convert a landscape motif into, as Gordon Brown has termed it, 'a symbolic shorthand'.<sup>128</sup> McCahon quickly saw the metaphorical possibilities offered by the curve of white water through the dark background of rock-face and vegetation. To a mind such as McCahon's, it was but a short step for that graceful arc of water to be transposed to a fall of spiritual light illuminating the darkness of the human condition and, by further refinement, to become a metaphor for the cleaving of evil by good. In these new images McCahon had found a motif that he would explore and adapt over the next ten years.

A major change in McCahon's life took place in September 1964, when he left the Auckland City Art Gallery to join the staff of the University of Auckland School of Fine Arts (Elam) as a lecturer in painting. He would remain in this post throughout the 1960s. Almost all who passed through his classes were influenced by the experience, although in differing ways. For some, McCahon provided a role model on which they were to base their own careers; for others, influenced by international trends towards a cool and dispassionate abstraction, McCahon's deeply involved and emotional painting, and his increasingly dominant place as New Zealand's leading artist, represented an orthodoxy



Colin McCahon teaching at Elam, University of Auckland, 1967. Photograph by S. Pilkington.

against which to struggle in their quest to assert their own visions.

Founded in 1888, Elam had been established with the bequest of Dr John Elam, to propagate English artistic values in the then 48-year-old colony of New Zealand. By the time McCahon joined in 1964, New Zealand was entering a period of similar political change to that which shook other Western countries at that time. As elsewhere, this increased political activism was particularly focused in the country's universities. The anti-nuclear movement of the early 1960s had politicised a generation that now found its focus in a variety of liberal and left-wing causes and ideals, of which opposition to the Vietnam War was the most prominent. McCahon's appointment was not without its detractors. His opponents criticised his lack of formal, academic education and his unorthodox attitude, while disregarding his growing importance and his active career as a painter. Yet McCahon was keenly aware of international art movements and the history of art and philosophy. He was widely read, part of an intellectual and literary circle, and – perhaps most importantly – he was teaching from experience. At the same time he tried to discourage his students from slavish imitation of what they saw in the glossy, fashionable, imported art magazines, instead seeking to encourage them to explore their own individuality. For those students keen to explore the new ideas being pursued abroad – and which, in New Zealand, were only available via such magazines – this was to be a source of tension. It is ironic that it was similar access, through magazines, to images of Braque and Picasso, that first strengthened McCahon's own resolve to explore Cubism. The difference was that in the 1930s McCahon had been seeking an alternative to the strict 19th Century styles and traditions still being promulgated by the likes of the Otago Art Society. Now, at Elam, he was trying to encourage his students to develop their own path, independent of the new orthodoxies being promoted – particularly in America.

His ideas about teaching were, as he himself admitted, based on the teachings of R.N. Field in Dunedin. As Gordon Brown observed:

‘Colin McCahon always tried to get the students to think for themselves, to build on a set of values, to work out their own idea of how to solve a problem....I think the important thing that McCahon gave those kids at Elam was a sense, not only of direction, but of purpose...of working towards being a professional in their attitude to painting...’<sup>129</sup>

Another of McCahon’s students, Claudia Pond Eyley, recalled:

‘McCahon set many exercises for his students. He made use of traditional forms such as still-life, painting from the human figure and some landscape. One memorable painting exercise was a still-life study of two white eggs, on a white saucer, on a white piece of paper – to be investigated for a period of one week. McCahon looked on with an impish grin.

‘When the week was up a clear bottle was added. As can be imagined, we made a very careful study of form during that fortnight, for it taught us how to look carefully...

‘Another phrase McCahon used that sticks after a decade is: “To paint is to contrast”. Other sayings were: “A curve contrasts with a straight line”, or: “Black contrasts with white”.

‘We students saw such concepts illustrated in McCahon’s own work, especially in his *Waterfall* paintings which were contemporary with this time.’<sup>130</sup>

In September 1964 paintings by McCahon were selected for the *New Zealand Contemporary Painting and Ceramics* exhibition, which toured Japan, India and South-East Asia in 1964–65.

## 1965–66

In early 1965 McCahon returned to an examination of the theme of numbers, taking up where his 1958 exploration of their properties had left off.

In August 1965 *Numerals* (pages 96–97), along with *Gates* and a small group of *Landscapes* were shown at Barry Lett Galleries, McCahon’s new Auckland dealer. Reviewing the exhibition at the time, Gordon Brown observed:

‘If the *Gate* painting can be seen in the perspective of the work which followed it, the other paintings exhibited are, like many new works by McCahon, a jump ahead of the spectator. On first viewing they demand a great deal if one is to understand them. This is especially true of *Numbers* [shortly thereafter retitled *Numerals*]. Computers may be associated with these figures, but it is their visual forms as shapes that indicate the real significance of this sequence. They are, in fact, very formal paintings. The old saying about art hiding art has relevance here.’<sup>131</sup>

Since antiquity, numbers have played a prominent role in the arts – as metaphysical symbols, as means to describe

ideal proportions, as principles for order (be it human, divine or occult), or simply as images equivalent to letters. According to the Pythagoreans (6th Century BC) numbers are the key to the harmony of the macro-cosmos, and thus are symbols of the divine order. Every form in the cosmos can be expressed in a number, the ‘divine archetypes’.

In the Christian faith, many of the teachings of the Church are based on the symbolic meaning of numbers. According to Hrabanus Maurus (776–856), medieval monks were advised to study mathematics in order to achieve a better insight into the Bible. In the visual arts, there exists a long history of a symbolic use of numbers. Among other examples, Dürer’s *Melencolia* 1514 is one of the best known. McCahon was familiar with these precedents and traditions. Indeed, in his works from the early 1940s he had already shown his awareness of the proportional system, attempting to integrate the compositional 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 – with his understanding of Modernist structures and techniques. But it was the late 1950s before he became interested in the visual properties of numbers themselves and 1965 before he was able to turn that interest into a major artistic statement in *Numerals*. Initially titled *Numbers*, the 13-panel painting includes both Arabic and Roman signs as well as integrating a Maori koru motif (in panel 6).

‘The large *Numerals* series....took months to paint and developed very slowly. They work as a painting and as an environment. They are where we are in one way; and, in another way, if we could walk on from 10 where would we get to. I worked out many new formal problems here and in the paintings following them...’<sup>132</sup>

In an interview with Gordon Brown, McCahon added:

‘I’ve tried to give them a very definite purpose, both in their shapes and really what numbers say, and numbers do say a hell of a lot. They mark a time and a place: and I think this is important, but it must not be overdone.’<sup>133</sup>

Even now, in 2002, it is those images that involve numbers – *Numerals* 1965 and the *Teachings Aids* paintings of 1976 – that seem, among all McCahon’s major paintings, to most pose interpretive challenges to audiences. It is worthwhile to consider Gordon Brown’s account of *Numerals*:

‘A sense of achievement enters McCahon’s comment on the care he took with the formal aspects controlling the painting’s construction. Look at the individual numbers. Each has its natural shape and rhythm lovingly rendered so as to enhance its inherent forms and what distinguishes its shape from its companion numbers. Those of Arabic origin assert their superiority in this respect over the Roman numerals in the painting. There are two versions of 4 and, like 8, it is also spelt out as a word. Considerable skill exists in the play of black on white, white on black, enriched by a few passages of grey. Throughout its thirteen panels, the black-white-black counterpoint in this work creates an



East Window, Convent of Our Lady of the Missions 1965–66  
Upland Rd, Remuera, Auckland, New Zealand.  
TCMDAIL No. 001730  
Photograph by H. Rogers-Jenkins



The Way of the Cross 1966, installed in the Convent of Our Lady of the Missions,  
Plastic paint on three hardboard panels, 40 x 609 cm.  
TCMDAIL No. 001612.  
Photograph by H. Rogers-Jenkins

ambiguous balance of positives and negatives, but rather than acquiesce, the negative elements are as visually active as those termed positive.

‘McCahon’s statement also directs the viewer to the environment he has induced in *Numerals*, an environment not easily separated from its formal elements as a painting and which, as a viewer walks its nearly nine metre length, invites speculative involvement. The work opens with an almost total blackness of a void and concludes with a panel flooded with an inviting white light. On this panel, painted in sharp-edged black, ten is caught in both Arabic and Roman numerals; “10” above, “X” below. After the opening nothingness, the second panel begins with zero, or the ever-continuing circumference of a circle. Under this squats a Roman one with its possible reading as a personal “I”. Moving slowly at first along the panels in orderly sequence, the viewer traces the way from one to ten; once there, “X” positions the final situation. The artist then asks: Where do we go from there? Do we not repeat the same basic sequence over and over again? Look how the circular zero of the second panel is echoed in the “o” of the written “four” in panel seven and then finds fuller expression in the zero of “10” in the final panel; a repetition to reinforce the sense of a continuum.

‘Other than the white of the final panel, the only similar brightness occurs in the upper half of the fifth panel which also summarizes the preceding four panels. Darkness covers the panel’s lower section; against the upper whiteness are the numbers: 1 2 3. This sequence recalls McCahon’s fondness for Michelangelo’s dictum, “multiplied by one, two and three”. The significance of the 1-2-3 sequence for McCahon is implied by the extended introduction to these panels and that together they occupy almost half the painting’s length. Then there are the layers of meaning: one heralds unity, what is singular and unchanging; two, the division of forces, of contrast, or a double mode of being – material and spiritual, human and divine; three, a

sense of natural completion, of binding a beginning and a middle to an ending, of representing a triad of matter, mind and spirit, or of the Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Indeed, in conversation, McCahon frequently applied the analogy of the Trinity to his compositional division of a painting into units of 1-2-3, often with further subdivisions by three. Following the majestic 3 in the sixth panel, 4 occupies the seventh panel which is also the point of visual balance for the work. The remaining panels run their progression of numbers on to the easily multipliable unit of ten.’<sup>134</sup>

In passing it is worth noting the coincidence that at this time the American artist Jasper Johns was also exploring the visual qualities of numbers, but as a decorative element and without the Christian symbolic content.

McCahon was to continue to show with Barry Lett until 1976. The opening of Barry Lett Galleries was but one of a number of developments in the New Zealand art world at this time. Another was the formation of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council (later renamed Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa), an organisation through which government money was directed in support of cultural activities. The combined result of these various initiatives was a growing infrastructure for the arts.

Apart from the Barry Lett show, 1965 saw McCahon included in the exhibitions *Contemporary Painting in New Zealand* and *Eight New Zealand Artists*, which travelled to England and Australia respectively.

In the second half of 1965 McCahon began work on what was to be his largest public commission – the design and painting of clerestory windows in a new convent chapel being built for the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, in Upland Rd, Auckland. It was a project that would prove critical in determining the course of his future career, stimulating a renewed interest in religious subjects and



their symbolism. In the windows McCahon used traditional Christian (Catholic) symbols, both pictorial (the Cross, the dove, a crown of thorns, wheat and the chalice) and textual (IHS, XP), as well as newer symbols of his own devising – an adaptation of the light through darkness motif, for instance.

‘From November 1965 to May the following year I worked on painted glass for the Convent Chapel in Upland Road for the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions. The east wall above the altar occupied me for the whole of November and December – day and night. Archbishop Liston and I had a “real go” about the painting and the right order for the panels. We argued for hours. He finally left, saying, “Have it your way if you must.” I stayed on and repainted all night to have it his way. He was right: I just had to think harder. I have a photograph of a beautiful lily in a glass vase made for this job – I don’t know where it is – it was just too beautiful to fit into the scheme and somewhere got left behind and lost...[The] Mother Superior...regarded the whole enterprise with amazing sympathy. The young novices who came whispering in and out to look at the work in progress were very fine people. The west wall was made during the May university vacation by Rick Killeen and myself. This was good – Rick protected me on the narrow planks, always passing on the outside – we could sit and discuss the work in progress. The job was finished and the Chapel opened, and working towards meaning, in a real situation, came to an end.’<sup>135</sup>

Apart from the clerestory windows, the commission had also required the painting of a work based on the Stations of the Cross to occupy a specific space above the choir balcony. McCahon’s solution was *The Way of the Cross* 1966, a long, narrow, landscape-based painting with small wooden crosses attached above each Station. The numbers of each of the Stations functioned as a narrative structure while the scale of the painting necessitated the active participation of the viewer, both in order to re-enact the Stations and, more specifically, to appreciate the whole image. Here was another opportunity for McCahon to produce a painting to ‘walk past’, again introducing the dimension of time to his work.

The experience of the commission, its content and the solutions he developed, opened up many possibilities for McCahon. Most importantly, here at last appeared to be a way to integrate his interest in landscape and symbols, time and space, and the progression from life to death, and beyond.

Simultaneously with the convent assignment, McCahon was also working on another public commission, this time for the University of Otago’s new library building. The initial approach had come in October 1965 when the University’s Registrar had invited five artists to submit designs for a mural to occupy a wall of the library’s reading area. McCahon had accepted the invitation and provided a sketch of a numerals-based image in which he combined Arab and Roman numerals, as well as the words for numbers. This work is *Numbers: sketch for University of Otago Library mural* 1966 (page 102). With their implication of systems and learning,



**Small Brown Hill** 1966  
Oil on canvas laid on board, 171.6 x 91.8 cm  
Private collection, Christchurch, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001103

to use numerals in this context seemed to McCahon an ideal subject for a university library.

At the same time, and largely to appease pressure from various Dunedin-based friends, McCahon also drew a rough outline of a mural based on a *Waterfalls* theme on the back of his numerals submission. McCahon’s delight at being awarded the commission turned to dismay upon finding that it was the *Waterfalls* design that had been accepted. Reluctantly McCahon accepted the situation, starting work on the multiple panels in May 1966 and completing them on-site in August the same year.

‘In this same year the mural for the Otago University

Library was painted. The painting was done in Auckland and shipped to Dunedin. When I arrived to oversee the installation I found one panel had been broken, and the whole thing had to be repainted on the spot. The first version was much better than the final one now *in situ*, the first, much more austere and beautiful. The broken panel was the key to the whole work: second versions never have the innocence of the first. The mural was a good try – but I would have liked to make it better.<sup>136</sup>

Earlier, in February 1966, McCahon had produced a group of four large vertical landscapes, two of which – *Large hillside* 1966 (TCMDAIL No. 001280) and *Small Brown Hill* 1966 – summarised all that had gone before in respect of the curved hill motif. The finest of the pair, and a painting which, importantly, also presages such landscapes of the early 1970s as *Venus and re-entry: the bleeding heart of Jesus is seen above Ahipara* 1970–71 (page 118), *Small Brown Hill* depicts an ambiguous hill/waterfall curve in which the divisions of plain, sea and sky are blended in a deep, rich field.

One of the first major paintings directly attributable to the convent commission experience was *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* 1966 (pages 98–99). In this 14-panel work McCahon purifies his earlier vision, ascribing a simplified, generalised landscape to each of the events that took place on Christ's route to Calvary.

'Each one of the series is numbered and inscribed with its traditional caption. This series is closely related in feeling to the *Numerals* and some of the *Waterfalls* as well as to many other paintings. It follows the earlier *Stations* made for the Upland Road Convent. They are all concerned with Man's fall and his resurrection. They also relate to the *Elias* subject but treat it in a different and new way. The black crows of the Van Gogh cornfield hover over this landscape too, but have failed to destroy it – yet. I am saying what I want to say in these paintings but I am still too abstract.'<sup>137</sup>

'There is about *The [Fourteen] Stations of the Cross* a sense both of time and of timelessness. The former exists in the progression from one Station to the next as this occupies real time. The quality of timelessness is conveyed through the inner strength that resides in the series as it assumes a devotional significance whose depth cannot be fully understood without contemplative solitude. The internal rhythm of the series is slow and imbued with solemn gravity...'<sup>138</sup>

This division of an image into the individual Stations set a precedent that McCahon would develop in a multiplicity of ways over the following decade. Indeed, given the repeated uses with which McCahon employed this motif, it is opportune here to restate the Stations. The account here was provided by the Rev. Alex Sutherland in a later exhibition based on McCahon's *Stations* painting:<sup>139</sup>

#### **I Jesus is Condemned to Death**

Jesus stood before the Roman governor, who questioned him.

'Are you the king of the Jews?' he asked.

'So you say,' answered Jesus...

So Pilate said to him, 'Don't you hear all these things they accuse you of?'

But Jesus refused to answer a single word, with the result that the Governor was greatly surprised.

At every Passover Festival the Roman governor was in the habit of setting free any one prisoner the crowd asked for. At that time there was a well-known prisoner named Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd gathered, Pilate asked them, 'Which one do you want me to set free for you? Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called the Messiah?' He knew very well that the Jewish authorities had handed Jesus over to him because they were jealous....The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask Pilate to set Barabbas free and have Jesus put to death. Pilate asked the crowd, 'Which one of these two do you want me to set free for you?'

'Barabbas,' they answered,

'What, then, shall I do with Jesus called the Messiah?' Pilate asked them.

'Crucify him,' they all answered.

But Pilate asked, 'What crime has he committed?'

Then they started shouting at the top of their voices, 'Crucify him.'

When Pilate saw that it was no use to go on, but that a riot might break out, he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, 'I am not responsible for the death of this man. This is your doing.' The whole crowd answered, 'Let the punishment for his death fall on us and our children.' Then Pilate set Barabbas free for them; and after he had Jesus whipped, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Gospel of Matthew 27:11–26

#### **II The Cross is Laid upon Him**

So they [the chief priests] took charge of Jesus. He went out, carrying His cross, and came to 'The Place of the Skull', as it is called. [In Hebrew it is called 'Golgotha'.]

Gospel of John 19:16,17

#### **III He Falls the First Time**

No record occurs in the Gospels of the three falls traditionally associated with The Stations of the Cross. It can only be assumed that there is some link between them and The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness recorded in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke – see Matthew 4:1–11). Because this link is tenuous, it is perhaps safer to think of Jesus stumbling under the sheer weight of the Cross as He makes His way to Calvary.

#### **IV Jesus Meets His Blessed Mother**

Once again, there is no Gospel record for this 'Station'. Presumably, tradition has placed Mary among the women of Jerusalem, of whom mention is made in the Gospel of Luke (see No. VIII). In the

Catholic tradition the association between Jesus and His Mother Mary has been close and intimate. Here, supposedly, they meet for one last embrace – a moment for solace and mutual comfort before the ordeal that lies ahead.

#### **V Simon is Made to Bear the Cross**

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon, and the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus's cross.  
Gospel of Matthew 27:32

#### **VI Veronica Wipes His Face**

There is no mention in the Gospels of Veronica. According to legend (probably French in origin), she was a woman of Jerusalem who offered her headcloth to Jesus so that He could wipe the blood and sweat from His face. It was returned with His features impressed on it. Various 'originals' of the headcloth have appeared.

#### **VII Jesus Falls the Second Time**

See note under No. III.

#### **VIII He Meets the Women of Jerusalem**

A large crowd followed Him; among them were some women who were weeping and wailing for Him. Jesus turned to them and said, 'Women of Jerusalem, don't cry for me, but for yourselves and your children. For the days are coming when people will say, "How lucky are the women who never had children, who never bore babies, who never nursed them." That will be the time when people will say to the mountains, "Fall on us," and to the hills, "Hide us." For if such things as these are done when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'  
Gospel of Luke 23:27–31

#### **IX He Falls the Third Time**

See note under No. III.

#### **X He is Stripped of his Clothes**

[The Gospels do not record the stripping of the garments, only the division of them.]  
After the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took His clothes and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier. They also took the robe, which was made of one piece of woven cloth without any seams in it. The soldiers said to one another, 'Let's not tear it; let's throw dice to see who will get it.'  
This happened in order to make the Scripture (Psalm 22:18) come true: 'They will divide my clothes among themselves and gamble for my robe.'  
And this is what the soldiers did.  
Gospel of John 19:23,24

#### **XI He is Nailed to the Cross**

There [Golgotha] they crucified Him...  
Pilate wrote a notice and had it put on the cross. 'JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS' is what he wrote. Many people read it, because the

place where Jesus was crucified was not far from the city. The notice was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. The chief priests said to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews", but rather, "This man said, I am the King of the Jews." '

Pilate answered, 'What I have written stays written'.  
Gospel of John 19:18–21

#### **XII Jesus Dies on the Cross**

It was about twelve o'clock when the sun stopped shining and darkness covered the whole country until three o'clock; and the curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Father, in your hands I place my spirit.'  
He said this and died.  
Gospel of Luke 23:44–46

#### **XIII His Body is Taken Down**

After this, Joseph [of Arimathea] asked Pilate if he could take Jesus's body...  
Pilate told him he could have the body. Joseph went and took it away. Nicodemus, who at first had gone to see Jesus at night, went with Joseph....The two men took Jesus's body and wrapped it in linen according to the Jewish custom of preparing a body for burial.  
Gospel of John 19:38–40

#### **XIV He is Laid in the Tomb**

There was a garden in the place where Jesus had been put to death, and in it there was a new tomb where no one had ever been buried. Since it was the day before the Sabbath and because the tomb was close by, they placed Jesus's body there.  
Gospel of John 19:41,42

With *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* 1966 McCahon's already spare and abstracted landscape vision became pared back still further. No longer dependent on the curved hill line, each of the Station's landscapes has been simplified to a banded motif of sky, hill and plain, with, in each, a simple white line hinting at cleft, road, fold or waterfall. In the *North Otago landscapes* of the following two years, even these marks are absent.

### **1967**

At the very end of 1966 McCahon, still inspired by the ideas and challenges raised by the Convent commission, began a group of paintings that again sought to imbue recognised images with new symbolic significance. However, this time the landscape is absent. Instead, in the *Still Life with Altar* paintings (page 100), and the subsequent 1968 series entitled *Visible Mysteries* (page 208), the key motifs are an altar and a heart, two images more traditionally associated with religious iconography. Both series employ the image of an altar, illuminated along the front and on one side edge. Sometimes a supporting beam gives to the altar the shape of a Tau Cross. Above or below each altar hovers a white





**Visible Mysteries II** 1968  
Plastic paint on hardboard, 91.1 x 121.8 cm  
Private collection, Sydney, Australia  
TCMDAIL No. 001518

heart. The symbolism here is direct and well known. The altar references the Catholic Mass, its re-enactment of the Passion and Christ's death in order to save the world, and His presence in the sacrament of Holy Communion as this relates to His importuning of His Disciples at the Last Supper. The heart, meanwhile, symbolises love – both earthly and divine, and by extension, the divine sacrifice of Christ. In some of the *Visible Mysteries* paintings, this analogy is extended and clarified through the transformation, yet again, of the waterfall motif. Now it becomes a stream of Christ's blood, pouring from the heart into a wine goblet placed upon the altar.

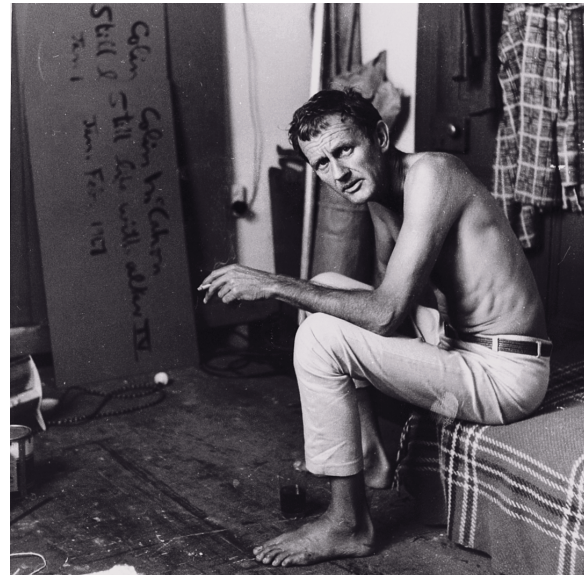
The multiplicity of symbolic meanings in these works makes them among the most complex and difficult of McCahon's paintings for a general audience to understand. McCahon was aware of these problems and shortcomings: 'Things that happened to me in 1967 resulted in an odd series of 1968 called *Visible mysteries*; these in their turn came from a previous series called *Still life with an altar*....It says something about where I wanted to go and what I was painting about – but not enough. I didn't reach far enough. I feel that some of this series will eventually be seen as more successful than they might now appear....I realise now that this subject matter needed a much larger format than I allowed it at the time. I also needed much more time to really think it out in all its implications. I have not given up – I am learning how to make it better...'<sup>140</sup>

Which other 20th Century artist tried to deal so directly with the mystery and wonder of the Eucharist? Nevertheless, as McCahon observed, the two small *Still Life with Altar* and *Visible Mysteries* series '[stood] apart a bit lonely so far' from his other work.<sup>141</sup> By contrast, the *North Otago landscapes* (page 101), a series of paintings that occupied McCahon for most of 1967, stood firmly in the spirit of a continuum stretching back to the early 1960s' *Landscape theme and variations*, and, earlier still, to 1948's *The Green Plain*

(TCMDAIL No. 000617).

In his introduction to the catalogue for the October 1967 Barry Lett exhibition in which the new series were first shown, McCahon wrote:

'These landscapes are based on places I have seen and known. I once lived in North Otago and in the last eighteen months have revisited the area three times. These visits have all been made in the winter. Each time it has been windless and cold. Once a thin snowfall lay over the hills and the essential black and green quality of the landscape was emphasised. Unlike many other parts of the country the landforms of North Otago suggest both age and permanence. They have been formed, not by violence, but by the slow processes of normal erosion on more gentle landscape faulting than has happened elsewhere. 'In painting this landscape I am not trying to show any simple likeness to a specific place. These paintings are most certainly about my long love affair with North Otago as a unique and lonely place, they are also about where I am



Colin McCahon in the studio at Partridge St, Grey Lynn, Auckland, late 1960s. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

now and where I have been since the time when I was in standards four and five at primary school and living in North Otago. These paintings stand now as a part of a search begun in Dunedin, continued in Oamaru and developed by the processes of normal erosion since then. The real subject is buried in the works themselves and needs no intellectual striving to be revealed – perhaps they are just North Otago landscapes.'<sup>142</sup>

Later, in the notes for his 1972 survey show, McCahon confirmed the relationship between the *North Otago landscapes* and the *Stations* paintings that had gone before:



**South Canterbury before a storm 1968**  
Plastic paint on hardboard, 59.5 x 59.5 cm  
Private collection, Sydney, Australia  
TCMDAIL No. 001107

‘These landscapes all derive from the earlier *Stations of the Cross* and from my own long association with this most beautiful landscape, both as a child and also later...’<sup>143</sup>

## 1968

With the exception of the eight *Visible Mysteries*, McCahon’s painting activity throughout 1968 concentrated on developing the landscape motif that had occupied him the previous year. In several series – *Helensville*, *Landscape Multiples*, *South Canterbury* – as well as a pair of *Easter Landscape* triptychs, he pursued an imagery that reduced these locales to their most basic elements.

In July, McCahon exhibited a group of landscape and waterfall images with the Bonython Art Gallery in Sydney, Australia. This was his second dealer gallery show in Sydney, the first having taken place two years earlier at the Darlinghurst Galleries. Although not an outstanding commercial success, the Bonython exhibition resulted in several important figures in the Australian art world, including Professor Bernard Smith and Mr Daniel Thomas, purchasing the New Zealander’s paintings. In all likelihood these were the first works by McCahon to enter Australian collections.

Recognition also came from another quarter in mid 1968 when Clement Greenberg, the influential American critic and active champion of modern painting, gave a lecture tour of New Zealand. Commenting favourably on McCahon’s work, Greenberg also spoke of the artist’s ‘personal conviction as a painter that has enabled him to pursue an independent course without being overwhelmed by the winds of change that frequently storm through the realm of art.’<sup>144</sup>

In October, McCahon exhibited the *Northland panels 1958* at the newly opened Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington. McLeavey would remain McCahon’s primary dealer for the rest of the artist’s career. Peter McLeavey recalls the origin of the relationship:

‘We met in 1962. I visited him in Auckland after I bought my first McCahon in the Ikon Gallery when I was 26. I looked him up in the telephone book, rang up and went to see him....We had some points of rapport such as a shared interest in Catholicism. We talked about aspects of European art and Catholicism. I understood the iconography of Western art intuitively. How mysteries and taboos of religion can be communicated by mundane, ordinary objects. That struck a chord with Colin and I could speak about what I had seen on my trip to Europe, Ireland and England. I shared his dream that here we lived in Paradise. He had a powerful feeling about what could happen; he was committed to realise his vision here....His art is like letters to people who live here, and to the world...

‘He knew what he did and he edited a lot.... As he said, his work was not painted for now but for people yet unborn.’<sup>145</sup>

In October 1968 McCahon showed the various landscape series he had completed during the year, along with the eight *Visible Mysteries*, at Barry Lett Galleries.

## 1969



Muriwai Beach, Auckland, looking northwest.  
Photograph by Charles Angel.

The year 1969 was to be among the most productive of McCahon’s career, in no small part enabled by his move to using acrylics. By December he had produced the largest body of ‘written paintings’ since the 1959 *Elias* period, and commenced work on the group of large-scale images for which he is best known. In May 1969 McCahon made



a decisive move in respect of his painting environment, establishing a studio at Muriwai, a coastal community some 40 minutes drive north-west of Auckland. Located on a hill inland of Muriwai Beach township, the studio was two kilometres in a straight line to the closest point on the beach, although double that distance by road. Here, at last, the space allowed McCahon to contemplate working on the larger scale to which he aspired but which the relatively confined Partridge Street studio had prevented. 'From my studio at the south end of Muriwai Beach, the beach and sand bar that fronts the Tasman Sea extends 48 miles to the Kaipara Harbour mouth. This is the sand dune and lake area of Waioneke. Kaipara Flats are north of Helensville. This is a shockingly beautiful area....I do not recommend any of this landscape as a tourist resort. It is wild and beautiful; empty and utterly beautiful. This is, after all, the coast the Maori souls pass over on their way from life to death – to Spirits Bay "carrying their fronds and branches"....The light and sunsets here are appropriately magnificent.'<sup>146</sup>

Yet 1969 had started quietly – the *Urewera, Near Craigieburn* and *Muriwai* images painted in February and March being small landscapes in the spirit of those of the previous year. Only an inscription on several of the *Muriwai* images hinted that McCahon's calligraphic script would soon return as a central motif in his paintings.

This text – 'As there is a constant flow of light we are born into the pure land' – had appeared first on a 1965 painting that bears these words as its title (TCMDAIL No. 001061). Taken from a Japanese Buddhist text, *Shinran's Songs to Amida Honen*, the phrase is an abridgement of a longer passage in which the virtues of Amida, who had attained Buddhahood, are extolled.



**Muriwai no. 6** 1969  
Acrylic and sand on hardboard, 28 x 29 cm  
Private collection, Melbourne, Australia  
TCMDAIL No. 001475

'He is known as the Buddha of the Light of Prajna because He dispels the darkness of ignorance; the Buddhas and the beings of the Three Vehicles all join in praising Him. As there is a constant flow of Light, He is known as the Buddha of Constancy; because of perceiving the power of Light with uninterrupted faith, we are born into the Pure Land.'<sup>147</sup>

Amida, known as the Buddha of Everlasting Light, was a previous incarnation of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. As a bodhisattva, Amida had refused to accept Buddhahood unless he could grant eternal happiness in the Pure Land to whoever sought it from him, a compassionate promise known as the 'Original Vow'. As a result, the central precept of Amida Buddhism – a Japanese branch of the faith, also known as Pure Land Buddhism – is that any person who intones Amida's name, 'Namu Amida Butsu', with sincerity, faith, trust and devotion, will be granted an eternal life of happiness in the Pure Land that Amida has set aside specifically for those who call upon him.

McCahon's attraction to the text is understandable. In its analogy of light to goodness and uninterrupted faith, he found echoes and reinforcement of his own metaphor of a waterfall as a flow of redeeming light through darkness. On a more general note, it is interesting that not only was McCahon exploring non-Western texts at this time, he was also prepared to adapt one such passage to his own ends. By 1969, in the small *Muriwai* works and in an image painted on a drinks bar he had constructed for the author Maurice Shadbolt (TCMDAIL No. 000512, now in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), McCahon had subtly changed the text from the specific 'we are born into the PURE LAND' he had inscribed on the 1965 painting – with its direct invocation of the original source material – to the more generalised, but, for his purposes, more useful, phrase 'we are born into a pure land'. Meanwhile, the 'fall of light' in the *Waterfalls* had been rotated 90 degrees to become a foaming wave line in all but the first of the *Muriwai* paintings.

Closer to home, 1969 saw McCahon re-engage with Maori culture in the first significant way since 1965. In part this was the result of his daughter Victoria's marriage to Ken Carr, a member of a prominent Maori family, and, subsequently, the birth of their first child. These events prompted McCahon's interest in the genealogy and culture of his Maori relatives, a development that coincided with an increased consideration of Maori issues generally amongst New Zealanders at that time. However, the specific catalyst for the paintings that address these new interests and concerns was the gift of a book from his other daughter, Catherine. In *The Tail of the Fish: Maori memories of the Far North*, the author, Matire Kereama, recounts the genealogy, stories and history of her tribe, Te Aupouri, whose traditional lands occupy the very northern tip of the North Island. According to Maori origin traditions, the North Island was originally a fish caught by the ancestral figure Maui from his canoe (the South Island). The long strip of land that stretches north from the area around Kaitia, ending at the northernmost tip of the island at Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga) and Spirits



Bay, was regarded as the fish's tail. It was in this area that the Te Aupouri lived. Kereama records the everyday life in her community, Hauturu, in the early 1900s.

The first paintings to draw directly upon Kereama's book were two multi-panel works, *The Canoe Tainui* (TCMDAIL No. 000912) and *The Canoe Mamari* (TCMDAIL No. 001481). Inscribed on each image is the genealogy of the tribe descended from those aboard these respective migrational canoes, by repute held to have been among the group that first brought the Maori to New Zealand. The paintings, in which the names of the successive generations drift like smoke across an inky blackness, acknowledge the importance of Maori oral histories whilst restating successive generations' ownership of cultural traditions.

McCahon based other paintings, including *O let us weep* 1969 (TCMDAIL No. 001590) and *Te Rerenga Wairua (About the state of the tide)* 1969 (TCMDAIL No. 000567) on the community's ideas on the nature of death. In one beautiful and moving story, Kereama describes how:

'When I was a child no person died without first asking about the state of the tide, whether it was full or low. People always liked to die at low tide because the tide had to be completely out to enable them to reach Te Rerenga Wairua, "The Leaping Place of Spirits", in the Far North. This is a large hole at the bottom of the sea which is exposed at low tide, permitting the spirits to go inside. When the tide is full the hole is under water and covered with masses of seaweed.'<sup>148</sup>

This belief finds its expression in *On going out with the tide* 1969 (page 103). On one panel of this work McCahon has inscribed an English translation of a Maori proverb: 'One generation falls, another rises.' With its implication of generational change and continuity, it was a text that carried great weight for McCahon. So it was fitting that he should also inscribe it on a painting dedicated to his new grandson, Matiu Carr, *For Matiu: Muriwai* 1969 (TCMDAIL No. 000206). Yet on the same painting McCahon follows this text with another in which the destiny that will befall us all is made clear: 'Ours is not the death of the moon.' Interestingly, in a later work, *Ours is as the life of the moon* 1971 (TCMDAIL No. 000942), McCahon re-interprets the text: 'Ours is as the life of the moon. Our generation falls and another rises. Ours is the life of the moon.' Clearly the implications of the text have now shifted. What is not certain, however, is whether this was the result of McCahon having discovered the latter to be a more correct translation from the original Maori, or whether he had, yet again, adapted a source material for his own purposes.

The culminant painting of this group is *The Lark's Song* 1969 (page 105):

'From August to October I struggled with Mrs Kereama's *Lark's song*. I loved it, I read the poem out loud while I painted and finally the little lark took off up the painting and out of sight. The words must be read for their sound, they are signs for the lark's song.

'This whole series of paintings gave me great joy. Please don't give yourself the pain of worrying out a translation of the words but try for the sound of the painting. But never forget that these are the words of a poet too. Some people can read them.'<sup>149</sup>

Although not offering a direct translation, Matire Kereama provides the context and a sense of the essence behind the poem:

'Quite a big stream flowed through Hauturu settlement and contained many swimming pools. There were deep pools for the adults and shallow ones for the very young children. We spent many a happy day in that river, swimming, racing and diving until hunger drove us home...

'Early morning was the favourite time for swimming. When we felt cold we would lie in the grass in the warm sun. The noise of chattering children startled the skylarks from the undergrowth, the birds flying upwards, singing excitedly as they went. It was the signal to begin another game which we all loved – putting the skylark's song into words. The game lasted until the bird disappeared into the sky, still singing...

'"Lark Singing" was almost a daily ritual. All Maori children knew the song in those days and many of the elders remember some of the words even now. The point of the game was to see who could sing the song of the skylark with the fewest breath pauses. I could manage the words of this song in two breaths...

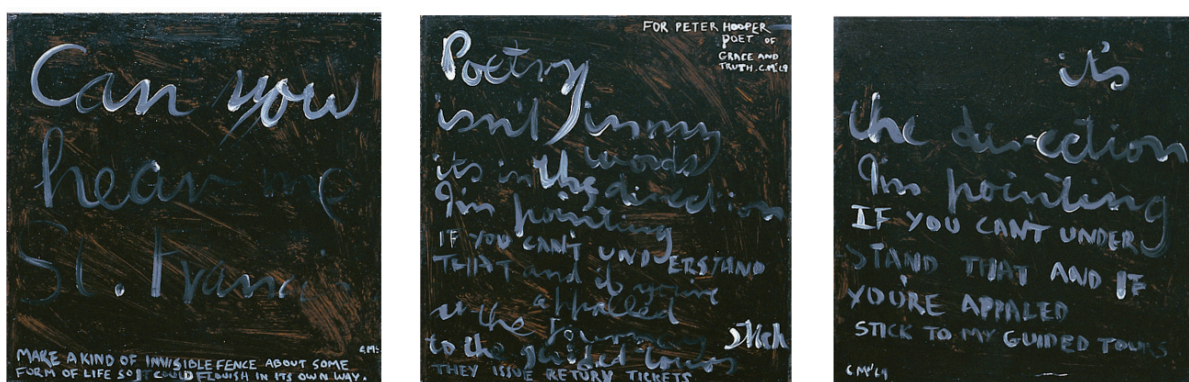
'In order to translate these words into English one must imagine thoughts of children lying lazily on the river bank, looking up into blue sky where the lark circles and flutters, while they sing the words they think the lark is saying.'<sup>150</sup>

Gordon Brown records that Kereama later sang the song in the gallery where the painting was being shown [probably at the time of McCahon's 1972 survey exhibition] and that this helped McCahon get a better understanding of its meaning, rhythm and poetical sounds.<sup>151</sup>

Two other publications interested McCahon during 1969 – a copy of the New English Bible, published jointly by the Oxford and Cambridge Universities Presses and gifted to him by his wife Anne, and a book of poetry, *Journey Towards an Elegy*, by the New Zealand poet Peter Hooper. Hooper was a teacher at Westland High School, Hokitika, alongside John Caselberg and it was the latter who sent Hooper's publication to McCahon.

In his 1972 survey catalogue account of the 1969 painting year McCahon implies that his attention turned to the New English Bible after the completion of *The Lark's Song*:

'After *Lark's song* I got onto reading the New English Bible and re-reading my favourite passages. I re-discovered good old Lazarus. Now this is one of the most beautiful and puzzling stories in the New Testament – like the Elias story this one takes you through several levels of feeling



Can you hear me St Francis 1969

Acrylic on three hardboard panels, each panel 30 x 30 cm, overall 30 x 90 cm

Private collection

TCMDAIL No. 000711

This triptych was painted as a gift of appreciation for the poet Peter Hooper. The text employed is drawn from Hooper's poem cycle *Notes in the Margin*. As Gordon Brown has pointed out, the sentiments expressed find the poet and the painter speaking with one voice.<sup>154</sup>

and being. It hit me, BANG! At where I was: questions and answers, faith so simple and beautiful and doubts still pushing to somewhere else. It really got me down with joy and pain. I loved painting it...<sup>152</sup>

In reality, the first works to draw on the Gospel account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44) appeared in April 1969 – the *April Paintings* – with a later group also named for the month of their production, June. As well as their *April* and *June* series titles, each work bears the subtitle *Let us go back to Judea*. In these small images McCahon inscribed passages of text in his trademark script, all but one painted white on black. With hindsight these paintings – *Are there not twelve hours of daylight* (TCMDAIL No. 001661), *If a man walks after nightfall* (TCMDAIL No. 001525) and *Mary went to the place where Jesus was* (TCMDAIL No. 001532) – appear like ‘storyboards’ for McCahon’s large-scale works of late 1969/early 1970.

The gift of Hooper’s poetry delighted McCahon, who, thanking Caselberg, wrote:

‘Last Friday (or Saturday) your book arrived. I have just written to Peter Hooper thanking him for the poems & now to you for the book. I am delighted pleased impressed and so on & have painted one for Peter himself (I hope it won’t terrify Peter when he gets it.)....The book arrived just when I needed it...<sup>153</sup>

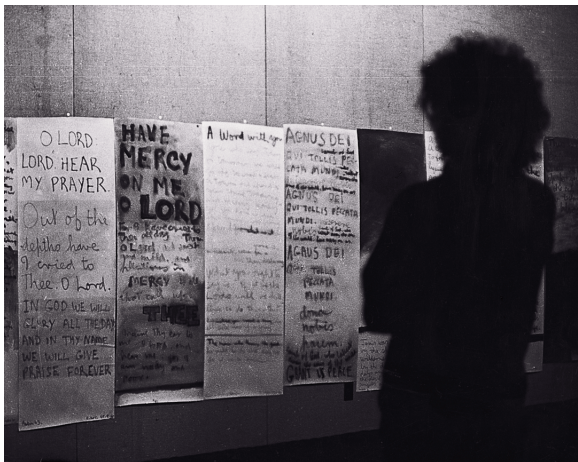
Inspired by these various texts, McCahon found the ideal vehicle for his next paintings in several rolls of trial wallpaper given to him mid year by his brother-in-law. Working intensively from late August throughout September, McCahon produced a large series of ‘written paintings’, each in a scroll-like format (pages 106–107). Texts from Kereama’s book, poems by Peter Hooper and John Caselberg (‘Van Gogh III’) and passages from the New English Bible were all grist for his endeavours. Favoured New Testament texts included the opening chapters of the Gospel according to St

John, James I, A Letter to Hebrews (in particular, chapter 5), Luke (chapter 7) and the First Letter of Peter (The calling of a Christian), while from the Old Testament McCahon drew on Psalms (90). It was not the narrative as such that interested McCahon in each of the passages, but the existential issues of doubt, fear, despair, hope and faith.

In October 1969 the *Scrolls* – as the series has become known – were shown at Barry Lett Galleries. Installed together, edge to edge, they created an environment – although with their overwhelming preponderance of text, not an environment such as McCahon had ever created before. Although the invitation states that ‘There are 50 more or less of these Written Paintings and Drawings’,<sup>155</sup> there were, in fact, 72 ‘scrolls’ in the exhibition. Often, as in the case of the *Elias* and *Waterfall* paintings, McCahon exaggerated his productivity when calculating how many works were in a series. This is a rare case where he underestimated the number of works he had produced.

Another project that occupied McCahon during 1969 was the production of a print, his first since 1961. A silk-screened print, *North Otago Landscape*, was published as part of a set of 12 Barry Lett Galleries ‘multiples’. Meanwhile, Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith published *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839–1967*.<sup>156</sup> Among the first serious publications devoted to New Zealand’s art history, the book emphasised the prominent position of McCahon.

In the last months of 1969, with his new studio at Muriwai enabling him to work on a scale hitherto not possible, McCahon commenced work on an expansion of the Lazarus theme. Whereas the earlier paintings had referenced certain key points of the account of Lazarus’s raising from the dead, now McCahon set about depicting the entire story on one mammoth canvas – *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* 1969–70 (pages 108–109). McCahon worked on the painting for the rest of 1969 and then, after a period of consideration and adjustment, put the



McCahon's Scrolls exhibition at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, New Zealand, October 1969.  
Photographs by Marti Friedlander.

finishing touches to the work in early 1970.

'To be honest it was a bit like drawing a Mickey Mouse cartoon. I grew to love the characters in the story and could see them as very real people; I felt as they felt. This took a monumental time to paint and gallons of expensive paint. It is in one way a dismal failure and in another one of my best paintings yet. At least I had fun and discovered very much more about both Christ and Lazarus as well as the sisters. I became very involved with the thoughtful sister Martha. Lazarus himself remains a rather distant figure. Mary might be a bit annoying on occasions and Christ perhaps a little too over-certain at times – but right. I spent weeks painting my way over this story, more and more involved realising the great need for a new kind of painting to happen.'<sup>157</sup>

The title *Practical religion* was one which McCahon had given previously to a group of the *Scrolls*, the texts for which had been drawn predominantly from James I and A Letter to Hebrews. Common to each is practical instruction and advice to the reader as to how they might lead a Christian

life on an everyday basis. Now McCahon extended the group of paintings encompassed by the title to include *Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* and its successor *Victory over Death 2*. In the former painting's subtitle – *the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* – McCahon both identifies the story depicted and, by reference to Mount Martha (a geological feature in the Central Otago region of the South Island), firmly grounds the story in New Zealand. Although the use of text dominates, this work remains underpinned by a vast landscape motif.

*Practical religion: the resurrection of Lazarus showing Mount Martha* is perhaps best characterised as a visual litany; a meditation on the resurrection of Lazarus with a particular focus on the faith, obedience and patience of Martha. Drawing on texts from John 11, the central themes are doubt, death and resurrection. Reading from the left, the players in the story, and the events that overtook and occupied them, unfold across the canvas. Each speaker is allocated a different sized lettering or typeface, and their attitudes to the unfolding drama are implied by tonal changes, the intensity of the colour ascribed to their words, or the placement of the words in brackets. By so doing McCahon was able to imply – variously – doubt, assertion, faith and resolution. To give one example, the text 'Could not this man who had opened the blind man's eyes have done something to have kept Lazarus from dying' appears in the smallest of types and between brackets – as befits those who whispered their doubts behind shielding hands.