

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

## CHRONOLOGY, PART 3: 1970 TO 1978

### 1970-71

With the resurrection of Lazarus image almost complete, McCahon started work on another large-scale painting – *Victory over Death 2* 1970 (pages 110–111). The title McCahon took from the heading given in the New English Bible to John 10:40–11:44, although the texts used in the painting itself are found in John 12:27–36.

*In Victory over Death 2* McCahon explores the biblical account of events subsequent to the raising of Lazarus:

‘Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem; he has foreseen the events of the final conflict that must end in his own death. With this realization he is deeply troubled. He wishes to opt out of his divine responsibility. But then he acknowledges that his whole earthly ministry has been heading towards his death: “It was for this that I came to this hour,” he says. He is the light. “While you have the light, trust in the light, that you may become men of light”. For without his guidance, those who journey in the dark do not know where they go. Is it not sensible and practical to walk in the light! It is a call to all people, at all times, especially those in the present. “I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end: who is and who was and who is to come. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one; for I was dead and now I am alive for evermore.”’<sup>158</sup>

Visually more dramatic than anything McCahon had produced previously, *Victory over Death 2* opposes a questioning and doubt-filled 'AM I' with a bold and assertive 'I AM'. With part of the former phrase painted black on black – and thus almost impossible to reproduce – it is only in the painting's presence that a viewer becomes aware of the full power of its questioning darkness. Indeed this opposition may, in the course of time, have become more visible – the result of the ageing process of the paint having produced changes to levels of contrast and colour.

'...[*Victory over Death 2* 1970] also belongs to the *Practical Religion* series – a simple I AM at first. But not so simple really as doubts do come in here too. I believe, but don't believe. *Let be, let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.*'<sup>159</sup>

Yet despite the initial darkness and despair, a positive tone emerges; a victory over Death seems possible.

Coinciding with his work on *Victory over Death 2*, McCahon produced a group of paintings which, whilst not on the scale of *Practical Religion*...or *Victory over Death 2*, were nevertheless significant achievements. Three of these images repeat texts which appear in the two larger works – *Are there not twelve hours of daylight* 1970 (page 115), *A question of faith* 1970 (page 113) and *A grain of wheat* 1970 (TCMDAIL No. 001022). The fourth, entitled *This day a man is 1970* (page 114), employs a text by Thomas à Kempis (c.1380–1471). Taken from *The Imitation of Christ*, the text emphasises the need to live life with piety and humility, while at all times remaining prepared for death.<sup>160</sup>

In March 1970 the six paintings were shown at Barry Lett Galleries in an exhibition entitled *Victory over Death or Practical Religion*. Reviewing the works, Hamish Keith wrote:

'*Victory over Death or Practical Religion* wastes no time with polite painterly games. It gets on with the job of confronting us with one man's intensely realised vision of what might be meant by life and death, salvation and resurrection. The power of McCahon's vision carries his paintings past the point where technical considerations have any real relevance ....McCahon's ability to carry a painting beyond what is normally accepted as its limits, is the real measure of his worth.'<sup>161</sup>

Perhaps in an effort to reassure his readers at a time when art world discomfort at such unabashedly religious imagery was growing, Keith went on to say that:

'It would be a mistake of course to settle for a strictly Christian interpretation of these paintings. They may well exist on that level, but they also exist on many others. Just as McCahon stretches the bounds of painting, he stretches the limits of purist theology as well...'<sup>162</sup>

While Keith may be correct, the chosen texts demand a viewer face up to the core nature of the works. As Gordon Brown has pointed out:

'They are concerned with the intangible mysteries of God's existence, of Christ's divinity, the means of salvation, the enigma of a resurrection, plus the overriding factors of doubt and the definition of what constitutes faith. As much as we may desire to bring these questions down to the level of human experience, this humanization should not be used to evade the essential spirituality that pervades the truth Christ preached. To ignore this factor would be to deny the religious nature of McCahon's enquiries. They are enquiries based on a very simple but deeply perplexing situation where questions are asked and answers sought. Doubt questions the validity of belief; scepticism queries faith. Yet it is possible to misconstrue the stand that McCahon takes. His position is not quite what it might seem to be. "I could never call myself a Christian" he has stated. The doubts that assail so many individuals constantly assail him too. Often he has been made painfully conscious that many professing Christians lack the insight to make their goodness both righteous, truly sociable and open hearted. The doubts such observations raised finally led him to consider the nature of faith. To this end he turned to the exposition on faith found in the Letter of James and A Letter to Hebrews.'<sup>163</sup>

McCahon had one further painting on these themes – *Gate III* 1970. Over 3 metres high and 10.5 metres long, it was the largest yet. Produced as part of an exhibition

**Gate III** 1970  
Acrylic on canvas, 305 x 1067 cm  
Victoria University Collection, Wellington, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001186





**Gate III** 1970 during installation of the *Ten Big Paintings* exhibition, held to celebrate the reopening of the refurbished and extended Auckland City Art Gallery, February–March 1971. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

entitled *Ten Big Paintings*, at the Auckland City Art Gallery, it was eventually displayed there in February 1971.

The theme of *Gate III* is an apocalyptic statement on the threat of destruction facing humanity – both physical destruction (from the dangers of nuclear annihilation) and, more critically to McCahon, the spiritual destruction which he felt was threatened by the loss of those spiritual ideals that bind a society together. McCahon cast back through his catalogue of motifs for *Gate III*; the texts include several that appear in the *Practical religion* images as well as others that go as far back as *The Second Gate Series*. The dominant iconography is, again, a monumental I AM; the text first used in 1954 now writ many times larger. However, this time he has set these pillars of light not against a black void (as in



Colin McCahon in the garden at Muriwai. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

*Victory over Death 2*) but in a landscape reminiscent of the *Landscape theme and variations* paintings.

In January 1971 McCahon resigned his position at the University of Auckland School of Fine Arts (Elam) to become a full-time painter. Although he would still teach at a summer school in Kurow, North Otago, for several years hereafter, he was now free to dedicate his time solely to painting.

‘My painting year happens first in late winter and early spring. I paint with the season and paint best during the long hot summers. I prefer to paint at night or more especially in the late summer afternoons when, as the light fades, tonal relationships become terrifyingly clear. At night I paint under a very large incandescent light bulb. I’ve been doing this for a long time. I am only now, and slowly, becoming able to paint in the mornings. After a lifetime of working – farming, factories, gardening, teaching, the years



McCahon, Kaipara Flat, c. 1970. Courtesy of McCahon Family Archive.

at the Auckland City Art Gallery – I find it hard to paint in the world’s usual work-time. It can be difficult to accept that painting too is work.<sup>164</sup>

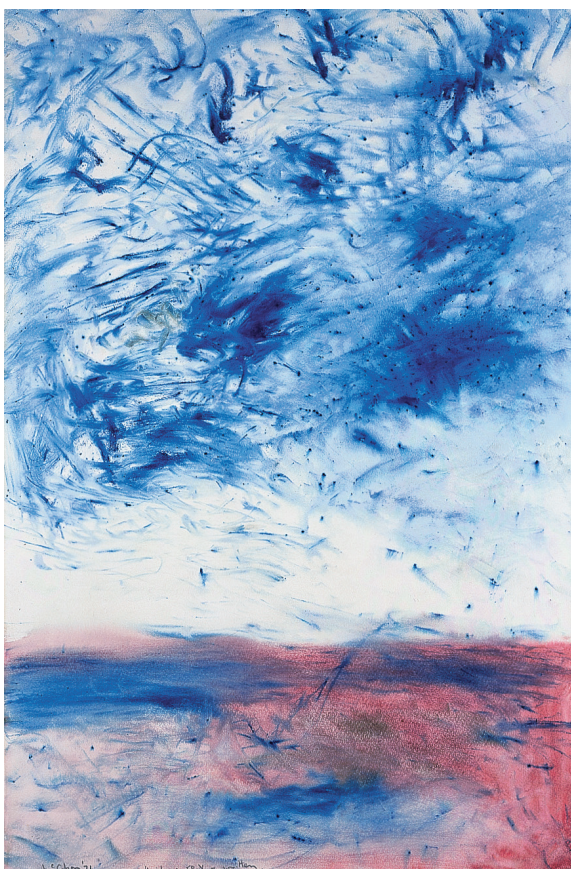
Following the completion of *Gate III* McCahon’s attention turned to subjects inspired by his exploration of the Muriwai studio’s immediate environs. In a series of exuberant, ‘Turneresque’ watercolours and acrylics on paper, he both acknowledged his surroundings and reflected his concerns over the environmental issues he felt threatened them. Throughout the various series from this time – *View from the top of the cliff*, *Ahipara*, *Helensville* and *Muriwai* – McCahon used colour, predominantly orange and blue, to create mood and atmosphere.

‘All this colour & fun is a direct result of leaving school,’ McCahon wrote in a letter to Maureen Hitchings, May 1971.<sup>165</sup>

Two selections of these new paintings were included in exhibitions in April 1971 – one with Peter McLeavey Gallery

\* ‘Kon tiki’ is the name given to a fishing device consisting of a small raft with a sail, attached to a long line with hooks placed at regular intervals. The method of use is to let the wind blow the kon tiki off shore as far as possible (as determined by the length of the line). Once in place, the raft and line are left for a couple of hours before being dragged back to the beach, ideally with the catch attached.





**Kaipara Flat – written 1971**  
Water-based crayon and acrylic watercolour on paper, 102.5 x 70.7 cm  
Private collection  
TCMDAIL No. 000494

in Wellington; the other, as part of a group show entitled *Earth/Earth*, at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland. The latter show was specifically designed to draw attention to ‘the many conservation issues facing this country’.<sup>166</sup>

‘I am painting about the view from the top of the cliff. This is at Muriwai. My cliff top is as yet largely uncorrupted but like almost everything else it is for sale. My wife and I who would at least try to preserve it can’t afford to buy it. It is unfortunate that buying so often has to do with destruction and exploitation. A beach section becomes a shop and a shop breeds a camping ground and a beach covered with plasticised “Sundae” containers and ice cream sticks and wrappings and plastic bags from the new season’s bikinis. There are dead “kon tikis”\* still armed with hooks, and bottles. Below the cliff, my cliff only at present, quarrying is blasting away a unique and irretrievable rock face; the beach below is smothered in its debris.

‘On the lower cliffs there are the nests of Fairy Terns. In the early summer the young are taught how to fly and swim and gather their own food. This goes on in spite of our intrusions, the cliff top parties, the broken bottles, the paper and plastic everywhere.

‘I once went to see the “Queen Mary” in New York harbour moored at the wharf and surrounded by a murky sea of sewerage and gently bobbing contraceptives. I have seen garbage blowing for miles in the Nevada Desert, hurled through that superb and beautiful landscape by the ever-present wind bowling tumbleweeds festooned with filth, paper like flags for a garbage festival streaming from scrub and fences.

‘My paintings in this exhibition are all about the view from the top of the cliff at Ahipara and Muriwai. I am not painting protest pictures. I am painting about what is still there and what I can still see before the sky turns black with soot and the sea becomes a slowly heaving rubbish tip. I am painting what we have got now and will never get again. This, in one shape or form, has been the subject of my painting for a very long time.’<sup>167</sup>

Yet McCahon’s focus was not limited to the landscapes near at hand. Now, perhaps as a result of being away from the glare of city lights, his attention was also caught by events in the night sky. Comets, lunar eclipses, satellites and returning lunar exploration craft all offered metaphoric possibilities for the artist. Of *Venus and the re-entry: the bleeding heart of*



**View from the top of the cliff, no. 3 1970**  
Water-based crayon and wash on paper, 107.8 x 71.3 cm  
Private collection  
TCMDAIL No. 000455



*Jesus is seen above Ahipara* 1970–71 (page 118) McCahon wrote: 'This is based on happenings seen in our own skies and the terrifying present we live in. Moon flights and the calm beauty of Ahipara seem to go together.'<sup>168</sup>

In another group of paintings from early 1971, the works titled *Cross*, McCahon expanded on a motif that had earlier found expression in several of the *Waterfalls* (for example, TCMDAIL Nos 001557, 000283 and 001097). However, whereas in the *Waterfalls* the motif had appeared as water falling from a pool at the top of the painting into another below, now the subject is light and the direction of its movement more ambiguous. Is it falling from above or rising up in a fiery pillar from below? Either way, the forms taken are those of the letters 'T' and 'T'. Each of these carries its own set of references. McCahon envisioned the 'T' as symbolising the sky, a fall of light and an enlightened or purified land. It was also the number 'one'. By contrast, while the crossbar in the 'T' still provided a metaphor for the sky, the fall of light was now into a darkened and benighted landscape. At the same time the 'T' recalled the Tau Cross. Also known as the Old Testament or Egyptian Cross, tradition holds this to have been the symbol with which the Israelites marked their houses in Egypt on the night of Passover in order that God would spare their first-born sons. Thus it carries with it a pre-Christian implication of protection.

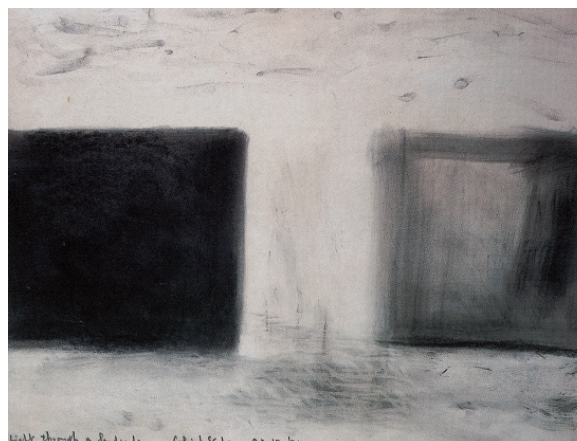
McCahon employed this symbology across a widely disparate group of works, produced during the years 1971 to 1975, and covered by the overall title *Necessary Protection*. (It should be noted that within this overall titling, which encompassed a number of series produced during this period, there also exists a body of paintings that bear these words as their specific title.) Between April and June 1971, an early working of the theme appears on three large canvases known as *The days and nights in the wilderness* paintings. The 'T' motif appears in *The days and nights in the wilderness, showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape* 1971 (page 116) while in *The days and nights*



Muriwai gannett colony showing Moturoa's rock column at right and Oaia Island in the distance.  
Photograph by Charles Angel.

*in the wilderness showing the constant flow of light passing through the wall of death* 1971 (page 117), it is the 'T' that dominates the image. The title of each painting leaves no mistaking the work's spiritual content while expressing McCahon's always present presentiment of death.

In July–August 1971 *The days and nights in the wilderness* paintings were shown at the Dawsons Limited Exhibition



*Light through a landscape* 1971  
Charcoal on paper, 44.5 x 59.5 cm  
Private collection  
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)

Gallery, Dunedin. The balance of the exhibition comprised works from series in which McCahon continued to explore his environs – the paintings entitled *Helensville* and *A Poem for Kaipara Flats*.

In the months that followed, McCahon succeeded in synthesising these two strands of his work – the landscape and the visualisation of the spiritual – in a series of multi-layered paintings and drawings with the specific title *Necessary Protection* (pages 120–121). In these works McCahon took inspiration from Moturoa Island, a rock column standing a few hundred metres offshore between the southern end of Muriwai Beach and the next beach south, Maori Bay. The singular feature of Moturoa Island is the colony of gannets that nest and rear their young both on the island itself and on the nearby landward cliff face. In this environment, McCahon found a rich source of metaphor. On the one hand the physical lay of the land, when viewed from McCahon's position on the cliffs above, could be abstracted into a representation of his 'T' and 'T' shapes – and, more importantly, be invested with their associated symbology. At the same time, the gannet colony, with its daily drama of birth, nurturing, instruction of the young, and the risk-taking and faith involved in the young gannets' first flights, provided striking analogies for the 'human condition' that McCahon was able to put to use in a wide variety of ways. In some paintings, another motif was added to the image in the shape of Oaia Island, a small islet lying further offshore from Muriwai. A favoured resting place for seabirds, the

island is covered in rich deposits of guano, rendering it light in colour. To McCahon, Oaia suggested Moby Dick, the great white whale of Melville's story. The metaphoric possibilities of the whale, whose biblical connotations included both the Devil symbol of early Christianity, as well as a positive role as Jonah's saviour from the tempest, were soon employed by McCahon in several paintings bearing the title *Moby Dick is sighted off Muriwai Beach* 1972 (TCMDAIL Nos 000146, 000211 and 0001485 – the latter on page 35).

In *Necessary Protection* McCahon found a title that allowed him to play on a multitude of meanings. On a physical level, the landscape depicted provided the 'necessary protection' for the gannets to breed and their cycle of life to continue. Yet the environmental changes and increasing pollution of the area, about which McCahon had written earlier, meant that 'necessary protection' of this environment was required. Coinciding, as it did, with the controversy regarding the French Government's continued nuclear testing on the South Pacific island of Moruroa – with the resultant focusing of New Zealanders' attention on wider challenges to the environment – another layer of meaning was placed on these words and their associated images. Finally, on a metaphysical level, the protection required of children by their parents, and of humanity by a spiritual being, each found a metaphor in this title and the paintings that bear it.

The first showing of the *Necessary Protection* images took place at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, in November 1971. In his catalogue introduction McCahon wrote:

'Necessary Protection: This is largely an exhibition of drawings. They all belong to a series made earlier this year under the title "Necessary Protection". They have to do with the days and the nights in the wilderness and our constant need for help and protection. The symbols are very simple. The T of the sky, falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE. The T of the sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament, or Egyptian cross....All these works are close relations to the waterfall of some years back.'<sup>169</sup>

In the same text McCahon acknowledged another impetus to the development of the *Necessary Protection* motif. This was a request by John Caselberg, made in a letter in July 1971, asking McCahon to provide an image for the cover of a planned book of Caselberg's collected essays and criticism. McCahon agreed and the final work chosen graced the cover of Caselberg's *Chart to my Country: Selected prose 1947–1971*.<sup>170</sup>

Again from the Barry Lett invitation:

'The drawings began with one made for John Caselberg's book "Chart to my Country". He and I both chart very similar country, both of us having knowledge of the wilderness and both knowing the very real need for protection.

'These drawings have been made to thank John Caselberg for his charts and also to further my own charting of this

often neglected country.'<sup>171</sup>

## 1972

In March the retrospective *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition* opened at the Auckland City Art Gallery before later touring New Zealand. The exhibition of 72 works covering the years 1938–1971 was accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue for which McCahon himself wrote the commentary.

Critical reaction was positive, with the exhibition hailed as evidence that clearly justified McCahon's reputation as New Zealand's pre-eminent artist. By contrast, the public's response to the exhibition was again largely negative and uncomprehending.

In August, when the exhibition was displayed in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the director, Les Lloyd, challenged the public to prove they could better the attempts of modern artists, inviting them to 'have a go' at painting their own McCahon. This unfortunate development fed a climate of



**The two prophets Te Ua and Te Whiti** 1972  
Acrylic on paper, 73 x 109.5 cm  
Jennifer Gibbs Trust, Auckland, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 000263

ridicule of McCahon's work already present in Dunedin as the result of *Gate III* having been used as the basis for a pastiche rock opera, *I Am*, performed as part of Otago University Students' Capping Review in April 1971. Although Lloyd offered the justification that his was an attempt at 'calling the public's bluff', the incident precipitated the resignation of long-time McCahon supporters Rodney Kennedy and Patricia France from the Art Gallery Society. In a letter, McCahon commented stoically: '...the whole business does not make any difference to me or my painting ....I do paint for people. Your "happening" can be accepted as an understanding of that fact.'<sup>172</sup>

However, positive recognition of McCahon's achievement came from a different quarter, with his receipt that year of a government-funded Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Fellowship.

In a series of paintings over the period May–August 1972, McCahon returned to his exploration of Maori themes



– and specifically to the subject of 19th Century Maori resistance to European settlement. This new direction was in response to a request from James Mack, then Director of Hamilton's Waikato Art Museum, who had invited McCahon to contribute a painting to a planned exhibition about the 19th Century Maori religious leader, Te-Whiti-O-Rongomai. Te Whiti had developed a doctrine of self-determination and opposition to colonialism, combining traditional Maori beliefs with elements drawn from both the Old and New Testaments, and overlaid with an element of mysticism. Seeking to lead his adherents in a programme of passive resistance to European expansion and settlement, his most celebrated achievement was the founding of a community at Parihaka in the southern Taranaki region of the North Island in the late 1860s. Designed as a practical example of Maori self-reliance and a centre of non-violent resistance to the colonial government's policies of land confiscation and expanding European settlement, the Parihaka community was, by the mid 1870s, the largest Maori village in New Zealand. In one of the most controversial incidents in 19th Century Maori–European relations, the village was sacked and destroyed by Armed Constabulary and Volunteer Militia troops on 5 November 1881. Although subsequently re-established on a smaller scale, Parihaka never again achieved the importance it had enjoyed during the 1870s. Yet it has remained a potent symbol of Maori resistance, its history continuing to be celebrated in literature and the visual arts.

The 1973 exhibition, *Taranaki saw it all: The Story of Te Whiti-O-Rongomai of Parihaka*, celebrated the religious leader and the settlement he founded. McCahon's contribution was the *Parihaka triptych* 1972 (TCMDAIL No. 001225), a painting incorporating both biblical and Maori references, and dedicated to Te Whiti and his lieutenant, Tohu Kakahi. Prior to the completion of this work, McCahon painted a group of smaller images in which he acknowledged other 19th Century Maori religious/political leaders – for the two aspects were almost always combined – including Te Ua Haumene, the originator of the Pai Marire sect, Te Kooti, the founder of the Ringatu faith, and Rua Kenana, the 'Maori Messiah' whose model farming community at Maungapohatu in the Urewera met a not dissimilar fate to Parihaka at the hands of a force of armed police in 1916.

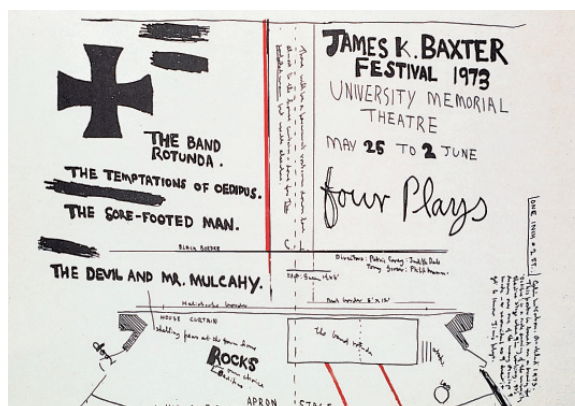
Of particular interest to McCahon was the way in which each of these figures had sought to adapt Christianity to their own times, place, circumstances and ends – adopting the message whilst largely rejecting the messenger. Among paintings from this group are *The two prophets Te Ua and Te Whiti* 1972, *Confrontation of the prophets, Te Ua and Te Whiti* 1972 (TCMDAIL No. 000581) and *Monuments to Te Whiti and Te Ua: Prophets* 1972 (TCMDAIL No. 000364). In each, McCahon has incorporated a *Necessary Protection* landscape – but now the twin black monoliths (formerly Moturoa Island and the adjacent cliff) represent the Maori leaders. In some images they are set apart in confrontation with each other while in others they are linked by a chain, perhaps a rosary representing their shared appropriation of Christianity. Well pleased with the paintings, McCahon wrote to John Caselberg, 'Some of my best work for years.'<sup>173</sup>

## 1973

Sadly, it was contemporary bereavements that would soon pre-occupy McCahon, dictating the course of his painting from late 1972 throughout much of the following year and into 1974. The death of the poet R.A.K. Mason in 1971 was followed by that of James K. Baxter in October 1972, Charles Brasch in May 1973 and, two months later, and most importantly, McCahon's mother, Ethel.

Searching for a way to address his loss in the wake of Baxter's death, McCahon turned again to the Muriwai environment and, in particular, to the beach's association with the traditional Maori spirit path to Te Rerenga Wairua, the 'jumping-off' point for departing souls. The first images to explore this idea were two small paintings dating from December 1972, *Dreaming of Muriwai* (TCMDAIL No. 001143) and *Jim passes the northern beaches* (TCMDAIL No. 000871). Each imagines the departed soul of Baxter on its flight north.

Much of McCahon's activity during the first half of 1973 was occupied memorialising Baxter. Although the two men had become estranged in the late 1960s, McCahon



Poster for James K. Baxter Festival, designed by McCahon for a season of plays by Baxter staged at Victoria University, Wellington, May–June 1973. TCMDAIL No. 001366

recognised that with Baxter's passing, he had lost a kindred spirit. McCahon accepted an invitation to design stage sets for a series of Baxter's plays performed at Wellington's Victoria University between 25 May and 2 June, and he eventually produced the publicity poster as well. Coinciding with planning for this project, McCahon worked on a large number of drawings and a handful of paintings, in which he expanded on the image of the soul's flight. The dominant motif in each was that of a flying cross/stylised aeroplane. In the generic title of many of these drawings, *Jet out from Muriwai*, McCahon alludes to the immediate inspiration for the image – the sight of climbing aircraft which, having

departed Auckland's international airport at Mangere, now set course for destinations in Australia and further afield. Again McCahon was able to take an everyday event in his world and, by investing it with multiple layers of metaphor, produce an image of memorable meaning and authenticity.

McCahon's exploration of these ideas culminated in the three *Walk. Beach Walk* series of mid 1973 and *The Shining Cuckoo* of the following year. In *Walk. Beach Walk: C1* (pages 122–123) McCahon returned again to a landscape analogy of the Via Dolorosa, numbering each of the Stations and – with deliberation – placing particular emphasis on numbers two and twelve. However, there is more, for in a complex refinement of *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* 1966, McCahon overlaid the image of Christ's last journey with the Maori tradition of the spirit's path, combining both in a 'painting to walk past' in which he depicted the tides, mists, weather patterns and moods of a landscape he loved: 'People should know perhaps that I don't regard these canvases as "paintings", they shouldn't be enclosed in frames, they are just bits of a place I love and painted in memory of a friend who now – in spirit – has walked this same beach. The intention is not realistic but an abstraction of the final walk up the beach. The Christian "walk" and the Maori "walk" have a lot in common.'<sup>174</sup>

Writing to Gordon Brown about the exhibition of *Walk. Beach Walk: C1*, at the Barry Lett Galleries, McCahon commented: 'The Lett gallery looked cold as the grave, but beautiful: I was talking about J.K.B. and not feeling like Spring Time Coming...'<sup>175</sup>

Yet *Walk. Beach Walk: C1* is not only an evocation of an imagined 'last walk' with the departing spirit of a loved one. The changes in tone, colour and imagery across each of the eleven panels stand as a metaphor for the passage of a human life – shifts in weather and tides symbolising the changes each person must encounter in the inexorable walk towards death.

'The walk traverses a lifetime. Events in that life become stages along the Stations of the Cross. Each stage has its own circumstances, its own particular state of being. At one position the tide advances, in others it recedes; in some the sea is rough, in others calm; in some the sun shines, in others the sky hangs overcast. The state of the tide and the condition of the weather, as found at each station along the *Walk*, can be aligned, in a loose way, to a traditional Station of the Cross; the sixth station, for instance, has the low cloud white-out that softly obliterates the land and thus can be likened to Veronica's veil...'<sup>176</sup>

A problem that bedevilled McCahon with these works was the mistaken assumption made by many of his audience that the 'walk' in this painting – as well as that referred to in the two *Walk with me* paintings of 1974 (page 125) – was an evocation of an actual event that had taken place while Baxter was alive. It is worth restating here that these were walks in the imagination: on the one hand, the Stations representing events that had taken place, and obstacles

overcome, in Baxter's life; on the other, an imagined final journey in which McCahon accompanies Baxter's soul on its path to the place of its departure to the spirit world.

Just as the *North Otago landscapes* of 1967–68 had reduced that particular environment to its essentials, so now, in a group of paintings associated with the *Walk. Beach Walk* series, McCahon depicts the moods of another area he loved – Muriwai – on single canvases. In *A piece of Muriwai canvas* 1973 (page 124), he abstracted and simplified the landscape to a purified essence of beach, sea and sky.

In late 1973, the return of the gannets to the nesting colony at Moturoa Island precipitated a new series of works inspired by events in the natural world. In the paintings titled *Jump*, McCahon explores the need for all creatures to make choices, taking risks in order to grow. The specific inspiration for the series came about as the breeding season progressed and the first of the hatchlings grew into young birds. McCahon realised that the very landscape features that had previously offered them protection were now impediments to be overcome if the birds were to learn to fly. In the first hesitant attempts at flight from the rocky outcrop there was no room for a loss of confidence, nor for error or failure.

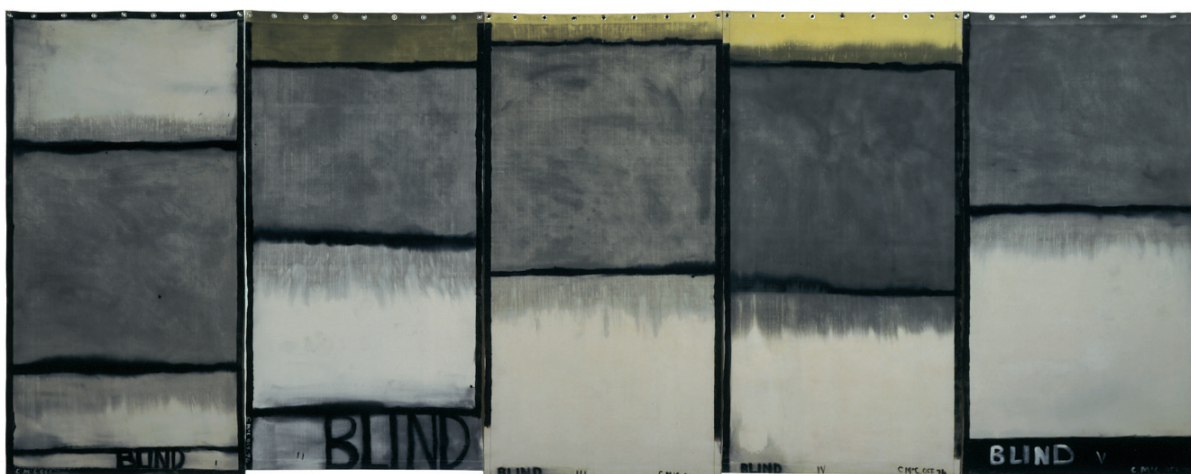
'[McCahon] considered the chasm that separated the mainland cliffs from those of the island rock. The chasm was a necessary gap affording protection, but in real life the situation it presented went deeper. In one way the gap protected but in another...[it] had to be conquered. He wondered, how does one get over the situation represented by the 'necessary protection' rock? Then he realized; one jumped. So the *Jump* series was born....Jump became a series of paintings representing an existential situation. The *Jump* series has to do with the unpredictability of life, with the freedom to choose between security and the uncertainty of taking chances and the determination needed when a risk is contemplated...

'*Jump* is a compact abstraction that covers many situations – particularly those circumstances which confront us with alternatives capable of altering the established pattern of our lives....*Jump E19* [page 119] is dedicated to Tomioka Tessai, a painter whose leap as an artist also became McCahon's leap into a realm of rough Oriental beauty that, in an alien yet familiar way, summarized much of what he himself strove to attain. Back in 1962 John Summers had observed the essential nature of this search when he wrote of McCahon: 'His work comes and must take that "mad leap" of communication at the new and shocking level. Sometimes I think he lands magnificently on the other side, sometimes he falls short.' But whether one lands well or falls short is an aspect of the existential *Jump* that cannot be foretold in advance.'<sup>177</sup>

## 1974

Early in 1974 the appearance of the comet Kohutek in the night sky inspired a group of paintings titled *Comet*, at





#### Blind I–V 1974

Acrylic on five unstretched canvases

Panel 1, 177.4 x 90.3 cm, Private collection; Panel 2, 175 x 90 cm, Private collection; Panel 3, 175.5 x 90.4 cm, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, gifted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Wellington, New Zealand; Panel 4, 175 x 90 cm, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, gifted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Wellington, New Zealand; Panel 5, 175 x 90 cm, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand TCMDAIL No. 000332

once depictions of the cosmic phenomenon itself and its movement in time, but also meditations on its symbolism as evidence of the creative power of God. The works were shown at Barry Lett Galleries in May–June, in an exhibition that in its subtitle, *Jumps and Comets – related events in my life*, acknowledged the significance and connection of both the events and the circumstances that had given rise to these paintings. Other series from 1974 included the *Rosegarden* paintings, with their newly introduced motif of a semi-circular loop of rosary beads, and the five works that singularly and as a group bear the title *Blind* (TCMDAIL No. 000332). These paintings return to the Muriwai beach of the *Walk. Beach Walk* series. However, the situation now differs:

‘To all appearances the beach, the sea and the sky are desolate, silent in calm stillness, yet for those who cannot see, this stillness becomes a veil cutting off the beauty that resides there....As Neil Rowe has surmised: “The title *Blind* is multi-layered. The works are painted on blinds but refer also, among other things, to the endemic national blindness to the twin pillars of McCahon’s work, the land and the spirit.” In these panels the sea and, to a lesser extent, the sky have, in the manner of their painting, a watery quality as if the elements were weeping for all who cannot or will not see.’<sup>178</sup>

The final painting to incorporate the issues and motifs already explored in the *Walk. Beach Walk* and *Blind* series was *The Shining Cuckoo* 1974 (page 127). The genesis of this painting lies in a Maori chant given to the painter Ralph Hotere by his father, Tangirau Hotere, and passed in turn to McCahon. In his letter sending the text to McCahon, Ralph Hotere writes: ‘It’s called the Song of the Shining Cuckoo and refers to the spirit on route to Te Reinga & resting for

a bit on a sandbank in the Hokianga harbour.’<sup>179</sup> Again McCahon combined the Stations of the Cross and the Maori migratory spirit path in an image reflecting the mists, tides and weather patterns of Muriwai Beach. However, this time, in an evocation of the shining cuckoo’s own migratory path north as it heads to its summer feeding grounds in the Northern Hemisphere, McCahon traces the bird’s flight across the painting’s five panels, its brilliant song inscribed on each of the landscapes it passes a salute to those whom McCahon had lost.

*The Shining Cuckoo* was first shown at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, in November 1974. The following year Robin Dudding, editor of the arts periodical *Islands*, sought McCahon’s permission to publish an illustration of the image and reproduce the texts from which he had worked. Rounding out the focus, John Caselberg agreed to contribute an essay on the painting: ‘...Colin McCahon has celebrated the vital sources of human culture here. His first effort was to reach back and to relate life in New Zealand to that kernel of European art and civilization, Christian myth and symbol. As a result, he has seen and represented human activity here in terms of New Testament compassion. From what we know of our history, this Christian inheritance forms one of the twin poles of our being. The other is the Maori presence...

‘A third perception is interwoven with the Christian and Maori elements in Colin McCahon’s painting. For so long and so repeatedly that it has become as a signature of his work, he has recorded that which most actually and thus most symbolically binds the life of an island people: the horizon; which divides here from elsewhere, us from others,

our better selves from our worse, our miniature world from the macrocosm, the sorrowing earth from the jubilant air, now from tomorrow...

'...*The Song of the Shining Cuckoo* [an earlier version of the painting's name]...represents aspects of mist and light which few people have ever experienced; and it is a very grand statement, not of sea motion, but of the motion of life and death....[It] mourns many New Zealanders who have recently died. With the lament are combined Christian and Maori meanings and a specific reference to the New Zealand horizon...

'Looking at the panels...we see raw Roman numerals marked across the canvases, tolling like bells for that prototype of European death, Christ's crucifixion; indicating here the fourteen Stations of the Cross...

'The panels are also illuminated with the words of a Maori chant, which traditionally welcomes visitors to marae in Northland, likening their arrival to the flight of the shining cuckoo....[McCahon] may have heard at night the other weird cuckoo call, the hokioi cry, which in former Maori times presaged death. Certainly he has gazed out from an abrupt cliff-top nearby at birds streaming on the wind, seeking haven from storms....From the same aerie, he has stared northward, up that dominant, receding, sky-rising tail of Muriwai beach, precursor to the more northern beach along which, according to Maori myth, the spirits of the dead must pass on their way to Te Rerenga Wairua, the leaping-off Cape whence Maori spirits return to Hawaiki and whence European dead must also surely try to journey back toward their forebears' homes...

'At "one" the birds arrive, flying through a clear grey sky which is irradiated overhead with white light. Below this, as Station "two", a grey beach stretches to an horizon of sky that is still pale, white, but yet is stained at its dawn edge with the yellow of sunrise, the yellow of life. The base of the beach, and of the panel, rings with TUIA TUI, Maori words calling on the dead to assemble; echoing too the TUI TUI T of Colin McCahon's 1958 *Northland panels*, where this liquid song pours apparently unheeded across a deserted land.

'The second panel comprises stations "three" to "six". "Three" is grey: all grey sky or earth. Below, in "four", the birds' line has dropped, fluttering here through white sky or over white sea. Under this lies "five", the grey beach; under which again, at the bottom of the panel, words glow in a clouded storm-dark sky, transmitting statements of bird-movement and of one bird alighting on the dark beach.

'This appearance of "six" is repeated at the top of the third panel, high in station "seven", in a sky lit with the song's title and with the acknowledgement that the words were made available by Ralph Hotere's father, Tangirau Hotere, an elder of Mitimiti, Hokianga. "Eight" hangs under "seven", the two stations forming centrally a tombstone column of grey and white sky through which the birds' line rises, the sky at its close repeating the light of the sun with a yellow splash above an horizon drawn across clear water, or water-bright,

clear reflecting beach.

"Nine" stands squarely, a paean of light, above "ten", where the birds swoop on, over the image that dominates the last two panels, the capital X of Christ, the X too that erases life and here hangs darkly as a Damoclean sword suspended above a dark, flat, empty plain, "eleven". "Twelve" rings out high above a sombre "XIII" through which the birds continue and under which lies the "white-out"-engulfed "XIV", a picture recapitulating richly, at its conclusion, yellow: the promise of life being renewed...

'In *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo* Colin McCahon praises the lives and mourns the going from us of some whom we here in Dunedin also wish to commemorate. By studying the panels, we honour them. If we repeat quietly the words of the song, we are asking the yet-living presences of R.A.K. Mason, James K. Baxter and Charles Brasch to return from their unfinished travelling to alight on this strand, to irradiate our lives with some of the flashes of truth which their lives discovered and, discovering, gave tongue and flesh to.'<sup>180</sup>

In 1976 McCahon donated *The Shining Cuckoo* to the Hocken Library as a memorial to the three poets.

## 1975-77

On both a personal and a painting level the years 1975 through 1977 were a period of intense activity for McCahon. Noise and disturbance from the construction on a new motorway through Newton Gully prompted the McCahons to move from their Partridge St home to a new house in Crummer Rd, Grey Lynn. A major survey exhibition of McCahon's early 'religious' works, curated by Luit Bieringa, opened at the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North in March 1975, subsequently touring New Zealand's major centres throughout that year. Two years later, in 1977, McCahon's *"Necessary Protection"*, an exhibition of paintings associated with that theme and curated by Ron O'Reilly, opened at the Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, before travelling to other centres.

In his introduction to the catalogue for McCahon *'Religious' Works 1946-1952*, Bieringa explained:

'The title of the exhibition specifically qualifies the adjective 'religious' so as to avoid any narrow interpretation of the term, to avoid labelling the works as strictly Christian despite their obvious Christian symbolism, for, just as McCahon has continued to stretch the limits of painting, so has he extended the bounds of purist theology or narrow inflexible creeds...

'Among the vast glossary of Christian symbolism many symbols are dead ones in the sense that they may be useful in making the invisible visible but they do not illuminate or make vivid for us the essence of the invisible....If he wished his images to make apparent the involvement with social and spiritual concerns in his own environment he had also to reconcile those religious symbols of an essentially



European derivation with his New Zealand setting...<sup>181</sup>

Further in his introductory essay, Bieringa quotes a letter he had received from McCahon: 'This lot is my life and being and I work on it now and can't wipe it out yet. I still believe in my God, but he has changed a bit. Not much really but now he tells me about this place in a new way.'<sup>182</sup>

Reaction to the chance to revisit these early works ranged from the positive critical reception of a few commentators, to the largely uncaring or negative response of the general public. In more than one venue, the exhibition provoked strongly opposed reactions from local body politicians who saw an opportunity for grandstanding at the artist's expense.

Meanwhile, McCahon had been busy on several commissions for building projects, amongst them the task of providing floor identification numbers for elevators in the new Auckland Medical School and coloured glass windows for two Catholic churches. However, his main preoccupation was with a project involving the supply of a large-scale painting or mural for a new Visitors Centre being constructed at Aniwanuiwa near Lake Waikaremoana in the North Island's Urewera National Park.

McCahon had accepted the Urewera National Park Board's invitation to paint the mural in October 1974. The theme specified by the Board and its architect was to be 'the mystery of Man in the Urewera', emphasising the spiritual 'quality of the pervading atmosphere of what is the Urewera'.<sup>183</sup> McCahon's acceptance of the commission came at a time of increasing Maori activism, which had

precipitated community debate about issues of race and land. The Maori Land March, and other protests in which activists contested land claims, had focused attention on these matters in a way not previously seen in New Zealand. Among responses to these concerns, the outgoing Labour Government created the Waitangi Tribunal to investigate Maori land grievances. Thus it was in a climate of sensitivity that McCahon tackled the commission project.

In the final work McCahon sought to interweave Maori and European elements in a united whole. Central to the painting is an image that is at once a kauri tree – inscribed 'Tane Atua' (the Maori god of the forest) – and a Tau Cross, a medium of divine power. As had become normal with McCahon, this motif also served as metaphor for other concepts; in this case the downfall of light – representing grace and enlightenment, and the upward journey to light (salvation). Texts suspended upon the vast landscape of folding hills and valleys include fragments of Maori poetry, and acknowledgments of the Tuhoe people in whose tribal area the Park lies, their genealogy and the names and symbols of their leader/prophets, Te Kooti and Rua Kenana.

The *Urewera Mural* was finished by McCahon in July 1975, and shortly thereafter Board members travelled to Auckland to view the work. Debate about some of the text ensued, necessitating several changes. Finally, in early 1976, the

#### **Urewera Mural 1975**

Acrylic on three unstretched canvases, overall 255 x 544.5 cm  
Collection of Department of Conservation, Aniwanuiwa Visitors Centre,  
Lake Waikaremoana, New Zealand  
TCMDAIL No. 001411



painting was completed to all parties' satisfaction and it was installed in the Aniwhaniwa Visitors Centre in June that year. Twenty-one years later, in 1997, the work was stolen from the Centre in a night-time raid, the result and statement of Maori grievances. The search for the work, the ensuing discussion about the fate of the painting and the issues its theft had highlighted, and its eventual recovery fifteen months later, ensured that the *Urewera Mural* became the most famous artwork made in New Zealand in the 20th Century.

Yet these events were in the future. Writing in *Art New Zealand* soon after the *Urewera Mural*'s unveiling, Neil Rowe reflected the contemporary views of those sympathetic to McCahon and what he had set out to do:

'In this smoulderingly beautiful painting McCahon depicts the brooding majesty of the Urewera country and also the inseparable bond between the people and the land which is the very essence of *maoritanga* [Maori cultural identity] and which should be the heritage of all New Zealanders.'<sup>184</sup>

More recently, in the catalogue for the 2000 exhibition at Wellington's City Gallery entitled *McCahon – A View from Urewera*, Gregory O'Brien has summarised the importance of the *Urewera Mural* and its associated paintings:

'A form of activism and, in the artist's words, "a potent way of talking", McCahon's Urewera works uphold Maori attitudes to the land and the enduring significance of the indigenous language, as well as specific Maori texts. In this respect the *Urewera Mural* is both an elegiac and a hopeful work. While the inscriptions on land and sky seem to imply that the Maori language has been banished to such hinterlands as the Urewera – a poignant observation at the time the work was painted – on the other hand, the landscape is also presented here as cradle and nest of the language.'<sup>185</sup>

Simultaneously with the later stages of work on the *Urewera Mural* in mid 1975, McCahon was occupied with another body of paintings – the three series of *Teaching Aids* (pages 128–129). Observing the learning processes being undertaken by his young grandson, McCahon was prompted to consider the way in which society passes knowledge from one generation to another. His response was to develop images that play both on a numerical sequence derived from the Stations of the Cross and, at the same time, address what Gordon Brown has called the 'sacred trust laid upon society to teach the young the way of life, even though life can be chancy and difficult.'<sup>186</sup>

In his essay that accompanied the display of the *Teaching Aids* paintings in Auckland Art Gallery's NEW Gallery in 1985, William McCahon described the dilemma that confronts many viewers of these works:

'At first sight the *Teaching Aids* series...appear to be a dense confusion of symbols, lines, words and numerals, all arranged in a tabular form reminiscent of mathematical tables, game scores, lists of prices on boards. The artist

presents us with lessons on blackboards, but the teacher has gone, the pupils also. We cannot hear the dialogue that supported this lesson. Rubbing outs and over-drawing on some figures leave us bewildered as to what we are being taught. We must follow the artist into the work if we wish to uncover its meaning.'<sup>187</sup>

'In the broadest sense the *Teaching Aids* are related to the difficulties people are confronted by in life. Again the numbers are spread between 1 and 14. Again the Stations of the Cross; and the numbers count out the stages in our lives, how we add up what happens to us, how we solve difficulties, and how we add or subtract in relating to the divine. In such a tally, some events loom large, others hold less significance, while other events appear as if they have been wiped away. How the numbers are arranged could suggest a path fixed by a prescribed sequence. But, as in a game of hopscotch, the lines separating each single number or run of enclosed numbers must be negated, must be existentially jumped. Yet, in playing this life game, alternatives exist both in the way the jump can be made and the direction taken. The play in either case depends on how the numerical sequence is read; whether down or up or across the dividing lines. But always there is the risk of landing in a blank, numberless space where the player's place in the game is lost. Life has its chances, its knocks.'<sup>188</sup>

William McCahon has also indicated that the numbers in *Teaching Aids* are informed by a second source: the Catholic Catechism. A guide on how to live a Christian life on an everyday basis, the Catechism is also intended to preserve unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine. It is in four main parts, each of which has numbered chapters, articles and subheadings. The panels in each set of *Teaching Aids* follow a similar order.<sup>189</sup>

Another possible influence on McCahon in his development of the *Teaching Aids* motifs, not previously commented upon, was the work of his friend the philosopher Arthur Prior. McCahon spent many hours in discussion with Prior in the late 1940s and later had in his possession Prior's books detailing his theories of modal logic. The similarity between the books' diagrams, in which the philosopher uses mathematical symbols to replace ordinary language to prove his theories, and the format of the individual panels of the *Teaching Aids*, is striking.<sup>190</sup>

Even the system of installation, as William McCahon has pointed out, carries a symbology beyond the merely practical. In the act of hanging each sheet with nails or pins, the artist recalls Christ's nailing to the Cross – while at the same time emulating Martin Luther's action when in 1517 he nailed to a church door in Wittenberg his manifesto against corruption in the Catholic Church.<sup>191</sup>

Reviewing the 1975 exhibition of the *Teaching Aids* at Barry Lett Galleries, Wystan Curnow commented:

'McCahon's art is impure. I mean to say that his art is a medley of symbolisms: religious, mathematical, linguistic, public and private, painterly and literary. His paintings





**Rocks in the Sky 1** 1976  
Acrylic on Steinbach laid on board, 73 x 109.5 cm  
Private collection  
TCMDAIL No. 001665

are wilfully out of the mainstreams of contemporary art. No one has painted pictures like this, no one is likely to. Everything is staked on the power of the artistic personality to make these symbolisms cohere in the body of the work, the corpus. So there are no single works, but sets, series and finally only one work, the life-work. McCahon would seem to obey these injunctions: it must be sacred, a matter of life and death. And he gains his power from them, as well as his modernity. Modernity is more a matter of sensibility than it is of forms. McCahon's forms are eccentric, his enterprise risky, but he remains the most ambitious and exciting painter we have.<sup>192</sup>

In a letter thanking Curnow for his review – 'the first and only serious comment I've had – there has been a deathly silence all around'<sup>193</sup> – McCahon continued:

'It doesn't matter, I got joy painting these ones & painted beyond the Stations because of my joy in being there and understanding more than I had yet known. I don't think I have been rude to the Church. I painted these for "children" who could see and for myself needing better sight.'<sup>194</sup>

Close upon the heels of the *Teaching Aids*, McCahon

produced several series of works in a burst of creative activity that lasted well into 1977. Common to all is their support material – Steinbach paper – and the extraordinary situation that in each case McCahon's initial inspiration was an incident in his everyday life upon which he was able to expand, creating images of universal relevance.

McCahon's Wellington dealer Peter McLeavey recounts how, having purchased one hundred sheets of Steinbach, a newly imported high quality art paper, from Webster's Art Supplies, he gifted around seventy sheets to McCahon, with the remainder to another of his gallery stable, Allen Maddox. McCahon, already familiar with the paper through his son William, was delighted with the gift, particularly pleased with a material that would support acrylic paint as well as any prepared canvas or board. Moreover, to have such a large amount of paper of uniform size and quality again offered him the ability to work in series, and encouragement to explore and expand a given motif.

It was again the view from the Muriwai cliff-top that inspired the group of paintings on Steinbach, known as *Clouds* 1975 (pages 130 and 131). Looking west, towards from whence

comes the prevailing weather, the approaching clouds pass above the viewer as stages and events in an individual's life; some heavy, tumultuous and carrying the threat of dark times, others light and ethereal, dissipating in the sun. Emphasising this idea, in all but two of the *Clouds* paintings, McCahon has inscribed the numbers of the Stations of the Cross, alternating between Arabic and Roman numerals as he had done in the *Teaching Aids* images. In each painting the cloud forms float in an ambiguous space, depicted frontally and with no real sense of perspective nor any indications of landscape that might provide a reference point for the viewer. Although predominantly black and white, several of the paintings are enlivened by touches of sepia – most memorably in *Clouds 7* (page 130), where McCahon has added a waterfall of redemptive golden light.

In the two series of *Rocks in the Sky* 1976 (pages 132 and 133) that followed, McCahon developed the *Clouds* motif further. The genesis for this new direction lay in a comment by McCahon's grandson, made upon viewing approaching dark storm-clouds while visiting the beach at Muriwai with his grandparents Colin and Anne, and mother Victoria. McCahon was most taken with his grandson's description of the black clouds as 'rocks in the sky', immediately sensing its usefulness as a visual metaphor for the stumbling blocks and impediments that occur in each individual's life.

Whereas the *Clouds* images evoked the skyward view from the cliff-top, in the *Rocks in the Sky* the viewer is down with the artist on the black sand of Muriwai itself. Although each painting is based around an abstracted view of the beach, the physical reference points in these images are clear: in the foreground, the lagoon (now no longer there, courtesy of the Forest Service's activities), and behind, the black sand beach, the waves and the darkened sky. These 'layers' of the landscape are laid down in bands of flat colour, in some images creating an almost Oriental sense of foreshortened perspective. Again describing the Stations in a mixture of Arabic and Roman numerals, McCahon elicits different meanings through their placement. In some works McCahon continues the earlier theme of an imagined walk along the traditional Maori spirit path. In others, including the painting subtitled *The lagoon. Plankton* (page 132), the higher numbers of the Stations of the Cross are inscribed on the lagoon – McCahon suggesting a linking of the events of life with the ebb and flow of the tide and its influence on the availability of life-sustaining plankton.

Writing of the painting subtitled *Veronica* (page 133), Gordon Brown explains the complex imagery:

'...In the first painting of the second series, subtitled *Veronica*, the numbers one and five are singled out in the upper reaches of the painting and given special stress. Although in the Stations of the Cross sequence the sixth position is reserved for Veronica, the compassionate woman who wipes the face of Jesus with her kerchief, in Christian symbolism the figure five frequently represents the number of wounds suffered by Christ, while the figure one is symbolic of unity. Significantly, the figure I is placed in a

white square, the emblem of earth and of earthly existence. The Roman numeral V, the element of suffering and compassion, being placed immediately under the square, links the square with its earthly unity of I to the remaining numbers in the numerical sequence II to XIV. The close association of I to V in this painting can be taken as adding up to six, the symbolic number assigned to the act of mercy performed by Veronica.'<sup>195</sup>

As with the *Clouds* and *Rocks in the Sky*, the inspiration for the *Noughts and Crosses* (pages 134 and 135) was provided by an everyday event. The idea for the series occurred to McCahon while watching his daughter Victoria play games of noughts and crosses with her young son. In their discarded scraps of paper covered in completed games, McCahon found a rich metaphor for the universal 'game' of life. For in life, as in noughts and crosses, each individual must play within a given set of rules, the choices made and chances taken determining what follows thereafter. In McCahon's hands, this simple children's game became a diagram of life and death. Now the cross was employed to represent both a positive and affirmative act and, through the metaphor of the Crucifixion, the promise of redemption. As well as the 'x' traditionally marking the 'cross' in the game, in certain of the paintings McCahon uses the shape of Christ's Cross. By contrast, the noughts here threaten the possibility of the abyss; a primordial void from which there is no hope of escape.

Throughout the middle months of 1976, McCahon maintained a steady output of deeply considered images. Although several series were produced in groups of fourteen – acknowledging yet again the numerical symbology of the Stations – the group of paintings collectively known as *Scared* is much smaller. Notably, in four of the five paintings in the series, McCahon's trademark calligraphic script appears as the central motif of an image for the first time since 1970. This sudden reappearance in the corpus also signals the imminent end of McCahon's use of the numerical Stations imagery in his paintings. Apart from in the seven-panel *On The Road* 1976 (TCMDAIL No. 001412), completed shortly after the *Scared* images, never again do the Stations appear inscribed in groups on a single painting.

Since its publication in the catalogue for the 1977 *McCahon's "Necessary Protection"* touring retrospective, the role of a photo of two young Maori men – standing apprehensively in Peter McLeavey's Wellington gallery space during a visit to the exhibition of McCahon's *Urewera* images in December 1975 – as the inspiration for the first of the works in this series, *Am I Scared* 1976 (TCMDAIL No. 000002), has become firmly entrenched in McCahon lore. However, the essence of these paintings lies much deeper than a casual assessment of this painting and the photo that inspired it might suggest, for the *Scared* paintings confront the very deepest issues of the human condition: the need to face the existential situation that is everyone's life – *Scared* 1976 (page 137); the urge to seek divine protection – *Open door* 1976 (page 136); and, in the final image of the group, *Mondrian's Last Chrysanthemum* 1976 (page 138), the resolve to face the

awful possibility of annihilation by nuclear holocaust.

In their scrawling white lettering on black – or in the case of *Scared: a small prayer* 1976 (TCMDAIL No. 000355) black on ochre – they are possessed of an urgency far less meditative than those series that had gone immediately before. Only in the final work of the five, *Mondrian's Last Chrysanthemum*, in which the affirmative or beseeching texts have been replaced by the horrifying vision of a landscape laid waste by a nuclear explosion, are words no longer sufficient. This vision of nuclear annihilation and its aftermath – ‘Ash’ – is McCahon’s picture that paints a thousand words.

From this universal perspective, circumstances soon returned McCahon to the personal. In the fourteen *Angels and Bed* paintings the theme, quite explicitly, is illness, death, and the role of angels as protectors. Angels had appeared in McCahon’s imagery as far back as the 1940s, their roles shifting as McCahon needed:

‘Angels as hope in our fleeting existence, guardians; angels as consolation; angels as protection; angels as conveyors of messages, the embodiment of artistic creation, the inanimate caught in the flux of existential animation, for angels carry such powers of transformation. Angels are for communication, of this world and in this world, interweaving the spiritual with the physical.’<sup>196</sup>

The impetus for the *Angels and Bed* series was an image McCahon painted as a gift for his friend and life-long supporter Rodney Kennedy, who was recuperating in his Dunedin home after a serious fall from a ladder. In *Angels and Bed* [no. 1]: *For Kennedy* 1976 (page 139) McCahon drew on his and Kennedy’s shared experience in the production of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* many years earlier. In particular, McCahon referenced Act 3, scene 4, in which Peer Gynt comforts his dying mother, telling her a story in which, invited to a feast at a local castle, they make believe that the woman’s bed is a troika sleigh that will take them there – ‘riding the bed of pain’. In McCahon’s image, Kennedy’s sickbed is rendered as the white shape in the lower centre of the painting – its form an abstraction of the *Peer Gynt* troika bed. Around Kennedy hover the white rectangles of protective angels, watching silently over their charge. Ironically, by some accounts the inspiration for this motif was the quadraphonic speakers Kennedy had had installed in his bedroom – a first, and a topic of much discussion, among his Dunedin circle. Although prosaic, this story accords well with McCahon’s inclination to extrapolate the everyday to the universal whilst explaining, on one level, the enigmatic inscription ‘Hi-Fi’ that later appears inscribed upon *Angels and Bed numbers 4* (page 140) and 8.

News of Kennedy’s misfortune was followed soon after by word that both McCahon’s Wellington dealer, Peter McLeavey, and an old friend, Dr Walter Auburn, were also suffering illnesses. McCahon worked on a further two images on Steinbach paper, one for each.

‘These [paintings] are still on the go and are based on Rodney K’s broken ribs & awful abrasions and a letter from

him – nights of pain & driving the bed to eternity – all *Peer Gynt* mythology....These 3 are very personal, “riding the pain”.’<sup>197</sup>

Interested in the possibilities offered by the image, McCahon proceeded to render it on a vast scale: *Angels and Bed no. 4* 1976–77. Whether unsure as to its success or simply constrained by economics, for the remainder of the series McCahon returned to the Steinbach paper he had used earlier. In each of the *Angels and Bed* works the sombre mood is emphasised by the limited palette: solid black overlaid with the white – often quite painterly – shapes of the angels and the bed. In some of the paintings it is just possible to make out semi-circles of raised white dots, looping across sections of the image – the traces of faintly described rosary beads. The perspective is unusual – almost the view of God looking down into the room from above. As the series advances to its close in *Angels and Bed no. 14: The Last One* 1977 (page 141) the scene of the encounter becomes progressively more empty and dark, the angels leaving one by one until at last but one alone remains to watch over the bed’s occupant.

In the last months of 1977, McCahon returned to the proceedings of the Crucifixion, focusing particularly on the wounds inflicted on the dying Christ. His exploration of this theme found expression in three large unstretched canvases, each titled *The 5 Wounds of Christ* (page 143). The hours in which these paintings are set are those between midday and three o’clock in the afternoon, during which time, according to the Gospels, darkness covered all the land. Witness to the final suffering of Christ, and awaiting the moment when the giving up of Christ’s spirit precipitated their pre-ordained role, the same angels who had appeared in the preceding series now hover around the perimeter of these images.

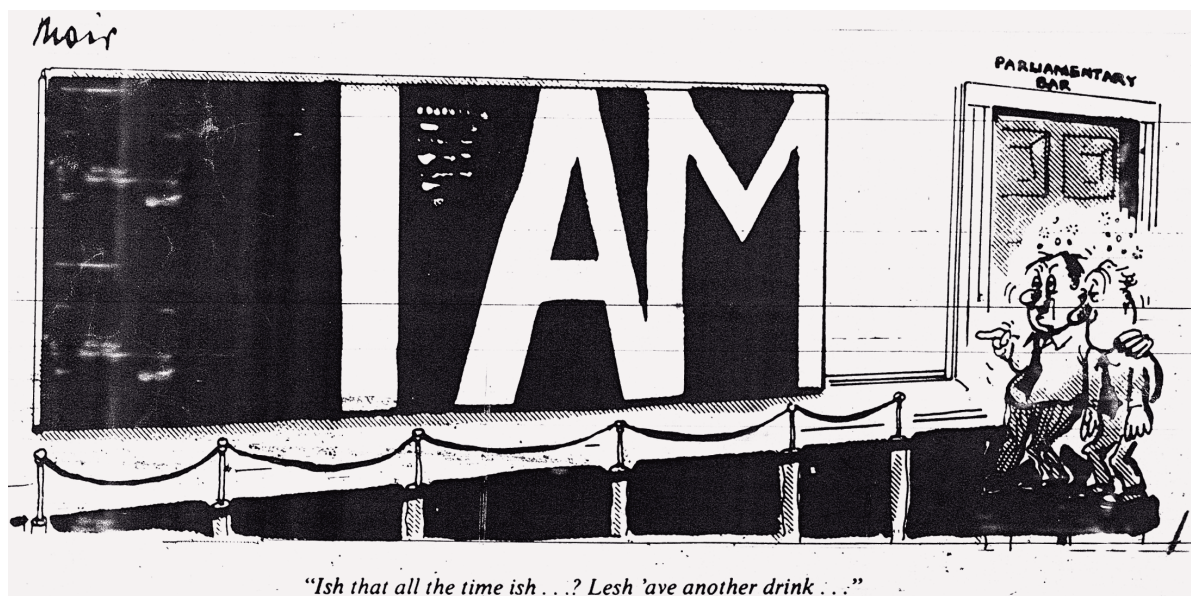
Meanwhile, beyond the studio, the last months of 1977 were notable for two events. As earlier indicated, in September the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth – which had been opened in 1970 as the first New Zealand public gallery dedicated to contemporary art – initiated the exhibition *McCahon’s “Necessary Protection”*. Shortly thereafter, the periodical *Art New Zealand*, which had commenced publication in 1976, issued a special number largely devoted to McCahon, *Art New Zealand No. 8*, November–December–January, 1977–78. McCahon was the first artist to be honoured thus.

## 1978

Painting activity in the first months of 1978 continued to focus on completion of *The 5 Wounds of Christ* images. However, work in the studio was soon overshadowed by other events in McCahon’s life. First came a controversy in Lower Hutt, prompted by a media-created story, the focus of which became McCahon’s 1972 painting *Through the Wall of Death: A Banner* (TCMDAIL No. 001405):

‘Like so many provincial controversies it all began in





The view from Australia. Alan Moir in *The Bulletin*, 28 March 1978.

the reporting of a city council meeting. In response to a routine report to Lower Hutt's City Council by the Dowse Art Gallery's Management Board, Councillor Chen Werry made what was a regular plea for the gallery to exhibit local art rather than the type of contemporary work usually on display. In warming to his subject Werry confessed that when he went to exhibitions there he wanted to "smash everything up". The press followed up the comment and arranged for a meeting at the gallery between Councillor Werry and the director Jim Barr. This was agreed to with Barr's insistence that for any photograph he could choose the artwork in the background. On being placed in front of McCahon's *Through the Wall of Death: A Banner* [purchased by the gallery the previous year] Councillor Werry was further stimulated to comment that given the paint and brushes he could knock up one like it in his lunch hour.

'It was this second media-initiated story that launched the controversy. Through manipulation the issue had now been switched from modern art in general to McCahon in particular. There were letters for and against and even an editorial in the local Hutt paper chastising the councillor until finally national television took up the tale at a remarkably literal level. Simon Walker of *Good Day* challenged Werry to paint a 'McCahon' on television. Werry accepted and Professor John Roberts, described as "a noted art critic", agreed to attend and pass judgement on the effort. Werry had been well and truly set up but he had been a politician long enough to know a bear pit when he saw one: "to be fair, I in my ignorance had never heard of Mr McCahon or his works until your photographer took our photos in front of one of his works", he lamented. But by then it was too late to back out.

'On 15 March he appeared, smocked and bereted in traditional artist garb, on *Good Day* with Simon Walker,

Professor John Roberts and Sandra Butt. Roberts seriously commented on the work and television tried to drain the last drop out of the event by offering it to the person with the best reason for wanting it.

'Throughout the controversy the gallery maintained that all publicity was good publicity. The usual tack. Being the subject of comment and debate makes the institutions seem to be at the forefront of cultural life. The fact that they ensure the ground is shifted to where they feel more confident (from modern art in general to Colin McCahon, for example) or refuse to debate in terms other than their own, using their specialist knowledge to defeat opposition, is not seen as inhibiting discussion. In general they accept controversy as being for their own good.'<sup>198</sup>

Although by no means all New Zealand public institutions dealt with McCahon in this way, it is a striking feature of his career how often his work became a vehicle for the pursuit of other agendas – particularly as a means to attack those perceived as reactionary or conservative, or as a way to engender publicity that 'engaged the public' – with little or no consideration for the feelings or sensitivity of the artist himself.

Feeding interest in the Lower Hutt incident was the announcement, several days before Werry's television appearance, that the New Zealand Government had marked Australia's Bicentennial by presenting McCahon's *Victory over Death 2* 1970 (pages 110–111) to 'the Government and people of Australia'. In the furore that followed, McCahon and his work were subjected to unprecedented public ridicule on a scale not previously experienced by any artist on either side of the Tasman Sea, before or since. The tone was set by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, who in a widely reported after-dinner speech

offered this view on the matter:

'...And we've only got, they tell me, one internationally recognised painter, and that's Colin McCahon....They told us that the Australians' National Art Gallery was very, very keen to get one of these things, and that it would be given a place of honour in their new gallery, if and when it is built. Now I had in the back of my mind, being a devious person, and



McCahon's studio bench showing several works from the *Truth from the King Country: load bearing structures* series, 1978. Photograph by Marti Friedlander.

knowing that the Australian news media are pretty much like our own, that if [Deputy Prime Minister] Brian Talboys went over there and had talks with [Australian Prime Minister] Malcolm Fraser, it could easily be a lead balloon. But I knew very well that if we gave them this painting the visit would be on the front of every newspaper in Australia. And right up to now, it's working out alright.'<sup>199</sup>

Despite the comment of James Mollison, the then Australian National Gallery's first Director, that *Victory over Death 2* was 'one of the most important paintings to have been made in the southern hemisphere in recent times',<sup>200</sup> Muldoon was proved right. The media in both countries lampooned the gift in cartoons, questioned the artist's integrity and sanity, and provided endless column inches to air the views of those who believed their five-year-old children could do better.

These uninformed and insensitive attacks hurt McCahon. At what should have been a high point of his career, he again found himself subject to denigration and criticism from the audience he had striven so long to engage in his artistic and spiritual journey of discovery – his fellow New Zealanders. The few voices of acclaim were drowned by the many mockers. Unsurprisingly, McCahon's personality and mood darkened. Always a drinker, he now sought greater solace in

alcohol. This in turn fed his insecurities and paranoia, whilst contributing to the beginnings of Korsakov's Syndrome, the disease that would eventually lead to dementia and, ultimately, contribute to his death ten years later.

Yet amongst the negativity there was some good news when in June the National Art Gallery, Wellington, purchased the *Northland panels* 1958. Meanwhile, McCahon erected a new studio on his Grey Lynn property, the convenience of which led him to spend progressively less time at Muriwai.

It was not until late 1978 that a period of sustained studio time again brought forth new works. Among the first of these was a body of small paintings in which the figure of the Tau Cross appeared superimposed on abstracted landscapes. The title of the series, *Truth from the King Country: load bearing structures*, instantly locates the image in the central North Island. For New Zealanders familiar with the main Auckland–Wellington railway line, the King Country is renowned for the Mangaweka Viaduct, which straddles one of the several deep river gorges that cut through the area. Thus McCahon's double metaphor – the 'T' as both Tau Cross and struts and girders – was instantly recognisable. In some of the images, the structure seems light and insubstantial – reliant more on faith than construction – whilst in others it stands solid, steadfast in the landscape.

After his return to the studio McCahon revisited the subject of Maori spiritual belief and leadership in two unstretched canvases sharing the title *May His light Shine* 1979 and a triple-panel work on Steinbach paper, *A Song for Rua: Prophet* (TCMDAIL No. 000378). In *May His light Shine – Tau Cross* 1978–79 (page 145) McCahon again depicts the Tau Cross as a source of light and life. However, in a development that moves the motif beyond the manner previously employed, in this image McCahon ties it to the



*Truth from the King Country: load bearing structures* 1978–79  
Acrylic on canvasboard, 27.8 x 35.6 cm  
Private collection  
(This work is not yet recorded on the database.)

idea of a kumara god – a carved stone fertility figure invested with spiritual qualities by Maori in pre-European times. Part of an elaborate spiritual system, stone kumara gods were worshipped in the hope that the incumbent spirit would ensure a successful harvest of kumara, the sweet potato that was a staple of the Maori diet. Originally brought with the first canoe migrations from Polynesia, the kumara was a vegetable that was much more difficult to cultivate in New Zealand's temperate climate. Accordingly, a sophisticated structure of beliefs had been established around the kumara, with prescribed ceremonies and activities dedicated to the plant's protective gods designed to ensure a successful harvest. McCahon's interest in these stone gods had been piqued by his discovery of one – dating from around 1200 AD and excavated by road workers in the 1920s – installed on a concrete plinth in Auckland's Cornwall Park. In the text inscribed on the painting – 'He's The One. May His light Shine on the Kumara Patch. Mine Thou Lord of Life send my roots rain' – McCahon interweaves Maori and Christian spiritual references, along with a line from a favourite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, into a seamless unity.

Although these works retain about them a positive air, in a handful of major paintings begun towards the end of 1978, and which occupied the artist throughout much of 1979, one may, arguably, detect several harbingers of the turn McCahon's mood would soon take. Among these works is the three-panel *Imprisonment and Reprieve* 1978–79 (page 144), begun as a response to the judicial enquiry that led to the pardoning and compensation of Arthur Allan Thomas. A farmer from Pukekawa in South Auckland, Thomas had been imprisoned in 1970 for the alleged murder of his farming neighbours, Jeanette and Harvey Crewe. Unease at inconsistencies in police evidence prompted a group of informed observers, led by journalist Pat Booth, to run a public campaign aimed at overturning the verdict. After numerous enquiries, revelations that police planted the evidence that had convicted Thomas led to the overturning of his conviction in 1979. Given the events of McCahon's own year, it is unsurprising that he should have empathised with Thomas's tale of persecution. As Gordon Brown has perceptively observed, this work 'indicated a new path, tracing human guilt or innocence under the limitations of human justice.'<sup>201</sup>