The Spirit of Colin McCahon

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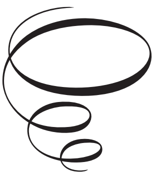
By

Zoe Alderton

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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No one seems to know what I'm on about, it amazes me; no one seems to know that I am painting Christ.

—Colin McCahon in Conversation with Sheridan Keith, 1980.[1]

[1] Colin McCahon in Sheridan Keith, "Colin McCahon: A Very Private Painter – The Artist in Conversation with Sheridan Keith," *New Zealand Listener*, May 17, 1980, 32.

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This monograph is based on my thesis "Gannets, Moses, and Gates: Colin McCahon as Prophet," (2013) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at the University of Sydney. As a postscript to examination, I would like to thank my markers Dr Rod Pattenden, Associate Professor Mike Grimshaw, and Associate Professor Peter Simpson. Your thorough and enthusiastic responses to my work were of great assistance. I very much appreciate your positivity in and your careful analysis of content. Thanks are also due to my supervisor Dr Jay Johnston who was such an influential part of this original project.

As Gordon H. Brown explains, McCahon often gave his paintings temporary titles before ascribing their permanent name. For this reason, any single work can be known by a variety of titles.[1] Names may also be ambiguous, and have sometimes been changed by the artist during the exhibition history of the artwork. Marja Bloem and Rudi Fuchs describe the establishment of a definitive list of titles for McCahon's works as "a task fraught with unforeseen difficulties."[2] This is indeed accurate, and titles employed in this book may vary somewhat from those employed in other literature. Every effort has been made to ensure as much clarity and consistency as possible.

Notes

[1] Gordon H. Brown, "Belief, Doubt, A Christian Message!," in *Three Paintings by Colin McCahon*, ed. Martin Browne (Sydney: Martin Browne Fine Art, 1998), 22.
[2] Marja Bloem and Rudi Fuchs, "Acknowledgements," in *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, eds Marja Bloem and Martin Browne (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002), 6

FOREWORD: RUMINATIONS ON THE DEATHS OF THE ARTIST

CHRISTOPHER HARTNEY

To say that Colin McCahon is dead is factually true, but there are many concatenations of death that surround him. His funeral took place in 1987, and since then his continued canonisation as the great artist of New Zealand has slowly proceeded. There are certain problematics arising around his legacy that scholars, arts administrators, and appreciators are still debating. These form a significant part of the background to how any scholarship on McCahon may presently be framed.

The most significant complexity surrounding his legacy is the place of his fervent Christianity as a central part of his artistic quest. Here, not only are McCahon's spiritual attitudes crucial and complex, but we also have to face the Western bias that until recently religion was an invisible topic in so much scholarship. When it was addressed, the likelihood of it being understood competently was rare. And it can be easily demonstrated that art historians and curators have such difficulties in speaking of the religious dimensions of recent art, that, more often than not, mention of the religious is avoided. Dr Alderton's training in art history is profound, but the reader will discover in this text that the author's skill lies not in simply producing another art history work on McCahon, but in writing sensitively about the artist from the perspective of one who has spent most of her career studying the religious life of the world. In this way, Dr Alderton has produced a work that conquers this general bias against religious understanding, confronts the uncomfortableness on this topic that we often face, and writes about McCahon's work with a spiritual frankness that has not yet been attained by the field of art history alone. In a way, this is the most valuable contribution that Dr Alderton has to make to this topic.

To conquer this particular bias, and make a fulsome study of McCahon religiously brings into effect a special form of life and death pervading his art project. The form of life, in these pages, refers to the national-religious project McCahon undertakes after World War II to birth a new nation in a

new ideal; one that takes its place in the world as a domain resolutely not European, yet one that nevertheless rings with a potent spirituality unique, complex, and Christ-centred. This form of death—one of those concatenations of death I just spoke of—is the presence of death in so much of the artist's work. As important as this world is, and as New Zealand may be, in many instances the artist works so close to death's presence that in many works it is as if he has indeed tasted of it enough to paint as one who, like his Messiah, is returned from some place supraterrestrial. That is, I would aver that some aspect of Colin McCahon's uniqueness lies in his ability to depict pain as though he is already dead, or at the very least, that the things of this world at a quotidian level are already dead to him.

The final death of McCahon is, ironically, his post-mortem death. I speak here of the preparation for the complete extinguishment of the artist's post-mortem life, his legacy, and his reputation currently being undertaken by the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust. This organisation's principal goal, it seems, is the mummification of discourse about their charge, the retardation of scholarship concerning him, and the ossification and eventual mortification in the public memory of this man. The reader will note that this book is a book on a visual artist where there is little chance of reproducing even the slightest amount of examples of his work. In this present text, sadly, not only is McCahon dead, but his images must also remain dead to our mind. And this is as the Trust would have it. You might say that my complaint is unexpected and perhaps injudicious in a preface whose tone is (by custom) celebratory, but any reasonable soul travelling through the cultural institutions of New Zealand will find ample evidence in conversations with curators and conservators of the mortifying zealotry of those who presently guard McCahon's copyrights. For them, the hours of work by any scholar who dedicates him or herself voluntarily and enthusiastically to the study of McCahon, must be met with a paywall that remains insurmountable for many. Scholarship is certainly something they cannot encourage nor countenance. The outrageous costs imposed upon academics working without payment on McCahon is presently the only reward these guardians can offer.

I say this firstly as a complaint, but also as an explanation as to why this significant text comes quite unillustrated. But the complaint also goes to the heart of how academics will reflect on McCahon in future years – that is, they shan't. As Zoe Alderton offers this book to reassess, debate, and keep alive the legacy of a great New Zealand artist, I ask you to consider that she has written this insightful work within an atmosphere of death. As one group strives to kill off the memory of the subject of this

work, she offers this work to keep that memory alive. This, I believe, doubles the value of what follows.

—Dr Christopher Hartney
Australian National Delegate to the International Congress of Aesthetics
President Australian and New Zealand Association for Literature and Aesthetics
Lecturer, The University of Sydney.

Auckland, 29 November 2015.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Born in Timaru, New Zealand, Colin McCahon (1919-1987) is celebrated as one of his country's seminal modern artists in terms of his unique and foundational contribution to national culture. Despite his current popularity, McCahon has always been a polarising figure due to his raw stylisation and evangelical themes. McCahon's work is redolent with Christian motifs, calling for the landscape of New Zealand to be loved and embraced in a particularly religious manner. He represented himself in the role of prophet, and was genuinely dedicated to the cultural construction of New Zealand under pacifistic Christian values. For the generally secular audience to which he spoke, this was a problematic ask. The disjunction between McCahon's intent and his audience's reaction is remarkably apparent. He overtly stated, "I aim at a very direct statement and ask only for a simple and direct response, any other way and the message gets lost."[1]

Unfortunately for the artist, most evidence demonstrates that this message was indeed lost. Though McCahon's audience comprises a divergent and ever-evolving group, no particular facet seems to have embraced the specifics of his theology or participated in the social and environmental change he hoped to bring about through his art. McCahon's religious content is a major factor in his disappointing reception. Ranging from suggestions that Christianity is an affront to the secular gallery space to the belief that his artworks have transcended commercial value, McCahon's imagery has sparked a plethora of divergent anxieties in relation to its religious motifs and messages. Nevertheless, none of these reactions were exactly what McCahon had desired. The unintentional obscurity of his message has meant that few respondents satisfy the demanding standards of reception that McCahon expected of his audience. He was distressed by a lack of understanding of his vision, which he perceived to be a failure of his art.

In order to understand McCahon's body of work, it is important to consider the context in which that work was made. When McCahon first met John Caselberg he asked "[w]ho are you? A poet or prophet or what?"

Caselberg felt that McCahon might have been unconsciously describing himself.[2] It is this interweaving of mediums that sets the scene for New Zealand's modern creative culture, spurred on by the tribal Nationalist Project.[3] This creative arts movement permitted a flexibility of text types whilst positioning the artist as a creator of culture and reformer of its ills. McCahon's prophetic inclinations can be traced back to this notion of the artist as social guide, seeking to usher in the Promised Land on New Zealand soil.[4]

McCahon also inherited a vocabulary of agony, labour, and failure from this discourse. In the introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse*,[5] Matthew Arnold's bleak statement on the Promised Land is quoted. Already this Promised Land resides in the unreachable future, indicated by Arnold's statement "it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness."[6] This nationalist paradigm outlined a specific goal, tying its success to the outcome of a distinctly local new culture. McCahon's unfolding oeuvre can be retrospectively read as a site of optimism for change, then a place of doubt and queries, until, finally, his art becomes a dark void of sorrow.

Nevertheless, this is no reason to doubt McCahon's ongoing commitment to Christian communication. His personal comments on faith (albeit abstruse) reveal a person who was seriously engaged with Christianity. The redemptive light of Christ, and the necessity for humanity to receive this discourse of social salvation, formed the essence of his worldview and self-identity as a prophet. McCahon's interactions with the styles and conventions of modernism also emphasise the pre-eminence of didactic and prophetic Christian communication in his art, above all other representational concerns. So too is there a clear schism between McCahon's chosen styles and the prevailing tastes of his audience. Popular emphasis on McCahon's 'ugliness' or obscurity has clearly distracted from his message. This failure of intended communication is core to the story of McCahon.

McCahon's art can be distilled to two core concerns: Biblical morality and the neglected spiritual potential of the landscape. Although attention will be drawn to McCahon's developing visual style, the key concepts behind his religious vision remain uniform throughout his oeuvre.[7] Indeed, in 1979, the artist claimed "[m]y subject hasn't changed from when I started painting."[8] McCahon aimed to bring a sense of immediacy and relevance into Biblical narrative via a recontextualisation of these stories into modern New Zealand. In doing so, he hoped to prioritise the spiritual power waiting to be discovered in his homeland, which he saw as a pathway to a peaceful postcolonial identity. This drive towards a better

reality is exemplified in the paradigm of the Promised Land to which he aspired, reflecting upon his self-perceived duty as a prophet. On the whole, McCahon's audience were uncomfortable with his overt proselytising and cartoonish stylisation.

He was significantly more successful in his portrayal of the natural world. McCahon illuminated the wilds of New Zealand as a generally untapped resource of transcendent spiritual power and national identity. His artworks aimed to unveil this powerful resource, allowing his audience to understand the value of knowing Christ and peace through the land. Although the specifically religious element of this message has been ignored, McCahon's landscapes have been received in a spiritual manner. Many viewers have seen them as a representation of the 'true' New Zealand, which creates and informs the soul of its people. This has influenced the development of a particular New Zealand gaze in terms of how the land is seen and presented.

McCahon developed a variety of pedagogical motifs based on images and experiences associated with the New Zealand coastline. In doing so, he hoped to present lessons on faith, nourishment of the soul by the natural world, and the alleviation of spiritual blindness. The peaceful and culturally syncretic nature of McCahon's vision is evident in his beach walk symbology, which bridges the Christian 'Stations of the Cross' with Māori afterlife mythology. His landscapes of numbers, mist, and crucifixions orient religious narratives within the New Zealand landscape and encourage direct audience participation. Unfortunately, the complexity of McCahon's interwoven symbols and the depths of his spiritual messages excluded casual viewers and did not result in the broad transformations desired by the artist.

McCahon's engagement with indigenous religiosity was a substantial part of his vision. Māori belief systems were a major means by which McCahon aimed to construct postcolonial New Zealand culture. He believed that the Māori worldview was more peaceful and spiritually nourishing than its European counterpart. Despite his integration of this belief system, Christianity remained at the heart of McCahon's spiritual vision. His use of indigenous history, including colonial aggression in the Taranaki region, was primarily a means of reflecting upon the potential of Christian prophets as advocates for peace and the potential interaction between this belief system and the natural world. McCahon's cultural appropriation is clearly problematic, despite his intentions. Exemplified in the theft of the *Urewera Mural*, McCahon's audience remains polarised over his Māori content, with some finding it offensive and others

celebrating it as a means of meaningful spirituality and bicultural negotiation.

McCahon was also greatly influenced by the threat and trauma of the Cold War. An associated fear of apocalyptic environmental degradation demonstrates that McCahon's faith in humanity was in steep decline towards the end of his career. Focusing on his identification with the Biblical figures of Moses and Jesus, the articulation of barriers to the Promised Land is central to McCahon's message. So too is the negotiation of these blockades, generally associated with violence and the inorganic world. McCahon's growing anxiety toward the unlikelihood of bringing about the Promised Land is expressed via narratives of uncertainty, confusion, and fear associated with these prophets of the Abrahamic traditions. His underlying suggestion is that the redeeming powers of Christ and nature may purify a corrupted world, although a lack of intended audience response led him to doubt the actual redemptive power of these devices if they are ignored.

Further doubt and spiritual negotiation may be observed in McCahon's final visual style, his Word Paintings. These images hark back to his belief in the intrinsic connection between painters and poets in the construction of New Zealand identity. They also reflect upon McCahon's constant aim of articulating his message in the clearest possible manner. Here he seems to speak his message aloud. These paintings were not postmodern critiques on the degradation of language. Focusing primarily on quotations from the Bible and Christian-inspired poetry, McCahon explored the difficulties of faith and the frustrating life of the failing prophet.

McCahon's last artworks are best read as the culmination of his faith-based dialogue with New Zealand. His very specific standards of reception had led him to become convinced of his own failure as a prophet due to the disjunction between his dreams of the Promised Land and decades of generally non-compliant audience members. The resulting anxiety is very clear in his final images. Aggravated by a degenerative illness, McCahon's grim paintings throw doubt on to the purpose of life and the presence of divinity. These last images demonstrate the very genuine nature of McCahon's Christian faith and his perceived role as a prophet, which led to despair as his audience continued to interpret his artworks in a manner that did not directly correlate with his aims as a painter.

The topic of McCahon is far from new in the academic of the New Zealand art world. As a popular and well-known painter, he appears in many texts and has done so for several decades.[9] Nevertheless, a comprehensive study of McCahon from the academic discipline of

Religion has not yet been undertaken.[10] Considering the notions of world-building and communal identity contained within his work and its reception, the religious studies paradigm is vastly underrated in this field. Issues of personal versus community faith, postcolonial mythology structures, secularisation, and so on, all have an impact on the way McCahon's message was both created and received. Mike Grimshaw's paper 'Believing in Colin: "A Question of Faith" from "Celestial lavatory graffiti" to "Derridean religious addict"' introduces possibilities in terms of the specific studies in religion lens.[11] In this volume, I answer this lacuna in scholarship, combining an art historical analysis of the visual features in McCahon's painting with a sociological consideration of his context and audience.

The Visual Rhetoric of McCahon

I am also concerned by analyses of artists that do not take into account the visual rhetoric of an image, and focus instead on formalist elements within the text itself. This approach fails to give due attention to the communicative dimensions of artworks, and the important relationship between author, text, and audience. Visual rhetoric prioritises the communicative purposes of a visual artefact, and has come from a more recent expansion of the field to include what Paul Messaris calls "workings of the more implicit or covert forms of persuasion."[12] Sonja K. Foss notes that not all images can fall within this paradigm. To be considered as a piece of visual rhetoric, an image must have symbolic dimensions that aim to portray a particular message; it must be consciously generated by a human author and/or interpreted by others; and it must be "concerned with an appeal to a real or an ideal audience."[13] In adhering to these features, an image can function as a powerful communicative device. John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman describe texts containing visual rhetoric as having the power to reflect "social knowledge and dominant ideologies" of a culture, to influence identity, and to mediate an understanding of events and periods in time.[14]

An image that is in the service of communicating a message to an audience—an image such as those found within the oeuvre of McCahon—is an artefact of visual rhetoric. It is not hard to accept a traditional painted artwork falling within this category of functional visual communication, especially when this artwork is primarily representational rather than abstract. Yet many commentators on McCahon ignore or neglect this vital dimension of audience communication within his artworks and explicitly stated aims as a painter. Without a consideration of visual rhetoric, many

important details about McCahon's desires, moods, and social context are lost.

Visual rhetoric is also the best way to account for McCahon's failures. As with any other branch of rhetoric, visual communication can fail to function as an author intends – especially if that author makes decisions that are unsuitable for communicating within their rhetorical situation. Hanno H. J. Ehses' study of visual rhetoric in poster design reveals the importance of an author's choices. He believes that visual design and visual rhetoric are successful when they heed to "pragmatic motivations and functional considerations."[15] An author cannot simply wish for a message to be conveyed, or hope that their communication style is the most appropriate way of persuading an audience of an idea. In order to promote a product or an idea, an author needs to accurately interpret the nature of his or her audience, and the best visual conventions for addressing their needs and putting forward an argument that can be understood.

In this manner, I also wish to respond to David Morgan's understanding of 'Visual Religion.'[16] Morgan illuminates the importance of studying both religious images *and* the society in which they operate, including that society's perceptual habits, cognitive frameworks, popular aesthetics, and its visual organisation of advertising and design.[17] Morgan notes the importance of reception in the study of visual culture. He remarks that the meaning of an image is dictated not by its maker, but by the processes of circulation and application amidst an audience.[18] Thus Morgan's observation, and the visual rhetoric framework more broadly, reflect the core argument of this monograph: McCahon's intended meaning was by no means the *received* meaning of his artworks. As Grimshaw claims, it is through the responses to McCahon's art that we may know the society that surrounds him.[19] So too do social structures and perspectives negotiate what McCahon's work 'means' at any given point, as well as the perceived value of his message and means of communication.

I hope to use this case study as a way of advocating for a more widespread academic acceptance of the visual rhetoric model within the analysis of 'high art' and artist biographies. As Foss notes, the process of a visual rhetorical analysis of a source differs from an aesthetic one, as the latter is concerned with sensory experience such as colour, form, and texture.[20] She proposes that an aesthetic response precedes the rhetorical response of a viewer. Aesthetic dimensions of a work must be processed before they can be rendered in the mind of the viewer as symbols of meaning.[21] This order of perceptive layers is important. In this volume, I seek to demonstrate the problems of communication that occur when the

aesthetic dimensions of a work are deemed too unpalatable to engage with on the secondary rhetorical level, problems of communication encountered when the rhetorical dimensions of an aesthetic feature are too obscure, or problems caused by a combination of these two dilemmas.

Considering McCahon's overt desire to directly address his audience and subsequently convince them of the merits of social change, it is vital that a study be undertaken that deals with this key area of audience reaction. So far there has been no in-depth analysis of the ways in which McCahon's art has been received or how his perceptions of his audience specifically determined the pattern of his visual expression.[22] In this volume, I expand upon his observations to justify exactly how and why McCahon's audience eschewed his prophetic message. There is an expectation that McCahon's audience will *care* about his inspired vision. I hope to explain why McCahon had this expectation and the social factors that formed it, but also to justify why his audience either missed the intended point of his discourse or chose to ignore it. In doing so, it is possible to justify exactly why McCahon's body of work turns from optimism to misery, and to explain the many communicative techniques he employed in order to arrest general disinterest in his prophecy.

Many published critiques of McCahon engage with the likeability (or otherwise) of his crude forms and rough brushwork. Others praise his intrepid canvas size, or the darkness of his latter-day palette. All valid and worthy approaches, but lacking in a deep consideration of how functional these elements were as rhetorical devices. As this drive to communicate is so clear within McCahon's biography, it seems a shame to ignore his perceived audience and the ways in which he aimed to speak to them. When audience reception has such power in the received meaning of an image, the maker should not be seen as an isolated force.

Notes

[1] Colin McCahon in *Centenary Collection: Contemporary New Zealand Painting* (New Zealand: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1971), 11.
[2] John Caselberg, "Towards a Promised Land," *Art New Zealand* (1977), accessed March 9, 2011, http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/mccahon08jc.htm.
[3] Francis Pound provides what he calls a preliminary definition of Nationalist New Zealand art, describing it as "that body of art and letters which, between c. 1930 and c. 1970 set out to uncover the essence of New Zealand, and, in doing so, to invent a specifically New Zealand high culture." See: Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art & National Identity 1930-1970* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), xix; Francis Pound, "Topographies," in *Flight Patterns* (California: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000), 133.

Although Pound's more robust definition of this cultural movement is fleshed out in the entirety of *The Invention of New Zealand*, this definition adequately summarises the makeup of the Nationalist Project and its aims.

[4] This Promised Land is a concept inspired by *Deuteronomy* in which the Israelites are reminded that God has promised them a land of bounty into which they will be delivered from their years wandering the desert. It is also a term connected with the Nationalist Movement and its goal of cultural discovery/invention.

[5] This citation of Arnold, a famous English poet, demonstrates the lingering presence of the British tradition despite efforts to frame the Promised Land in local terms.

[6] Matthew Arnold in Allen Curnow, introduction to *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923-45*, comp. Allen Curnow (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1945), 15.

[7] Marja Bloem, for example, strongly agrees that "the underlying thought and vision behind [McCahon's] paintings was perfectly consistent and the visual expression of the different themes coherent, notwithstanding that the formal development of his work may lead some to think otherwise." See: Marja Bloem, "Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith," in *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, eds Marja Bloem and Martin Browne (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002), 15-16.

[8] Colin McCahon to Agnes Wood [July 1979] in Agnes Wood, *Colin McCahon: The Man and the Teacher* (Auckland: David Ling, 1997), 121.

[9] Despite this comment, I do not wish to imply that additional scholarship has not been desired, or that the paucity of attention given to McCahon has not been commented upon. Perhaps the most perplexingly thorough example of this desire is the creation of the now defunct (?) Institute for Advancing McCahon. In April of 1993, the Institute for Advancing McCahon conducted 'A Survey to Establish the Level of Interest in New Zealand in Writing an Article About Colin McCahon'. This undertaking demonstrates the relative poverty of sources on the artist. Although more exist today, the increase has not been substantial. In their 1993 survey, the Institute for Advancing McCahon selected thirty-six respondents who had already published works on McCahon. The results led the institute to conclude "a definite lack on interest in writing articles about Colin McCahon." However, it is noted that 30.5% of positive respondents "showed a level of enthusiasm in their comments to indicate that future articles on Colin McCahon are to be expected." Of greatest interest is the lack of enthusiasm found in the academic community, of whom only 25% responded to the survey. Freelance curators and freelance writers returned an 85.7% response, making them the most enthusiastic category. Upon the application of an intensity analysis, it was discovered that many ambivalent respondents were enthusiastic about McCahon. Their lack of interest was determined to be financially motivated, as many comments on the surveys asked if remuneration would be involved. The institute concluded that the lack of interest in writing about McCahon was regrettable, but "there is little we can do about it." See: *A Survey to Establish the Level of Interest in New Zealand in Writing an Article About Colin McCahon* (Wellington: Institute for Advancing McCahon, 1993).

[10] There are, of course, several sources that do approach McCahon from this angle and many Studies in Religion scholars who have published or presented on the

artist. For example, noted Studies in Religion academic Lloyd Geering presented a discussion on "McCahon's life in the context of the rapid decline of the Christian basis of Western culture" at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2003.
[11] He writes, "[w]hile the paintings themselves have often been critiqued, little if any work has been done that reads the critics as articulating wider cultural and societal responses to God, religion and Christianity … I want to make the deliberately audacious claim that it is not the paintings themselves that should be the focus for scholars of religion. This is not because the paintings are unimportant—far from it—but rather that too often 'we' step outside our professional ability. The paintings are important texts, but too often scholars of religion concentrate on the primary text of the paintings and ignore the various commentaries. Therefore, I want to argue that the critical responses and writings on the paintings should be evaluated, because it is in the writing, not the painting, that we can track the changing religious culture of New Zealand." See: Mike Grimshaw, "Believing in Colin: "A Question of Faith" from "Celestial Lavatory Graffiti" to "Derridean Religious Addict"," *Pacifica* 18:2 (2005): 175-176.
[12] Paul Messaris, "What's Visual about 'Visual Rhetoric'?," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95:2 (2009): 210.
[13] Sonja K. Foss, "Theory of Visual Rhetoric," in Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis, and Keith Kenney eds, *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 144. When using Foss' work, I aim to employ both her idea of visual rhetoric as the communicative dimensions of a visual artefact, and visual rhetoric as a theoretic perspective through which the communicative dimensions of visual data may be highlighted.
[14] John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman, "Visual Rhetoric, Photojournalism, and Democratic Public Culture," *Rhetoric Review* 20:1/2 (2001): 37-38.
[15] Hanno H. J. Ehses, "Representing Macbeth: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric," Design Issues 1:1 (1984): 54.
[16] David Morgan, "Visual Religion," *Religion* 30 (2000).
[17] Morgan, "Visual Religion," 42. Morgan also expresses the importance of examining images that exist outside of the realm of "'museum-quality' fine arts." This is important to his argument, but has less bearing on the study of McCahon. Despite derision, McCahon's body of work is reasonably considered to be in the Western category of fine arts.
[18] Morgan, "Visual Religion," 42.
[19] Grimshaw, "Believing in Colin," 176.
[20] Foss, "Theory of Visual Rhetoric," 145.
[21] Sonja K. Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34:3 (1986): 329.
[22] Gordon H. Brown's *Colin McCahon: Artist* contains perhaps the most comprehensive consideration of audience reaction. See, for example, Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist* [new edition], (Auckland: Reed, 1993), 45 in which he discusses McCahon's use of speech bubbles and the reactions to this technique.

CHAPTER TWO

MCCAHON AND RELIGION

In order to properly understand the content and purpose of McCahon's visual rhetoric, it is important to consider the context in which his artworks were created. The 'Nationalist Movement', which sought to enact a high culture within New Zealand, was central to McCahon's vision of himself as a painter. This particular brand of nationalism infused his work with a heavy sense of agony and labour.[1] Also of importance was McCahon's religious context, both in terms of the personal beliefs he hoped to express and the perceived acceptability of this content. The question of whether or not McCahon was a Christian is an important one, as it determines the ultimate message of his oeuvre. This chapter considers the critical reaction to McCahon's religiosity, with a particular focus on his depiction as an artist/prophet. Although this is helpful when considering McCahon's religious beliefs, it is easy to over simplify his highly personalised and localised vision of Christianity and spiritual social duties. It is vital to turn to primary source documents in order to annunciate the nuances of McCahon's beliefs and prophetic aims.

Colonial Identity and the Invention of New Zealand

In 1945, the seminal nationalist figure Allen Curnow[2] remarked:

> Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn't exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created—should I say invented—by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers; even a politician might help …[3]

This 'invention' of New Zealand is the most useful paradigm through which to view the intentions and output of McCahon, and also the nature of nationalism as he experienced it. Curnow's proclamation has been proposed as New Zealand's most important statement about nationalism.[4] It is intrinsic to the nationalist culture from which McCahon emerged, and to his long-term goals as an artist/prophet.

New Zealand in the nineteen-thirties[5] was beginning to emerge as an independent nation. This was assisted by, and reflected in, its creative output. As Maurice Shadbolt explains, the "real sprit of the country" was formed by its creative arts as opposed to legislation.[6] Under the burgeoning Nationalist Project, New Zealand was presented as a potential centre and homeland, rather than a periphery.[7] Artists and writers were inspired by the call for creative minds to construct and define images of place and identity.[8] Allen Curnow believes that the poets of this era were "making a new discovery of their country."[9] In the visual realm, artists who emerged in the late nineteen-thirties such as McCahon, Doris Lusk, Rita Angus, and Toss Woollaston were the first generation to feel comfortable in their country and to describe it as a homeland instead of a place of exile.[10]

The Nationalist Project is an umbrella term under which these creative figures, aiming to construct or discover independent nationhood, may be grouped.[11] Summing up the artistic, pseudo-religious, and 'D.I.Y' attitude of the Nationalist Project, Diana Wichtel writes, "[a]rmed with pen, paintbrush, a self-conscious, often prophetic sense of mission and some No 8 wire, they created a version of the place that suited their cultural purposes."[12] The creative arts banded together with the notion of delivering a new message of national selfhood.[13] Pound explains that poets and painters aimed to create a new nation "in the very act of reading and viewing the new works."[14] So, for artists such as McCahon, painting became a dynamic site of identity formation and nation building that looked towards audience reception as an indicator of success.[15]

Representations of the land are a substantial part of the creation of a homeland.[16] Pound believes that landscape painting has, since the early days of European settlement, been a way of "inventing the land we live in."[17] In this view, a landscape painting has meaning encoded in its generic conventions, instructing an audience on how they are meant to receive it, and allowing nature to exist and be understood through this framework.[18] To read McCahon in this manner, one may observe the 'uninvented' vista of artworks such as *A Poem of Kaipara Flat* (1971), notable for its plainness of form with a blank horizon beneath an empty sky.[19] Although its title clearly indicates a real locale, this work simultaneously functions as a representation of a generic landscape awaiting its fulfilment of potential. The azure sky is near-fantastic and the earth plays into McCahon's primal spiritual spaces. His 'poem' seems to sing the land into being, giving meaning to empty places and imbuing them with spiritual possibility. This painting also suggests that a poem may be visually expressed, denoting a fluidity of definition.[20] An enduring tradition of

landscape within New Zealand poetry has been noted.[21] So too is there poetry in visual depictions of the land.

The idea of a new culture or new myth was often expressed via the idea of the Promised Land, signifying a better version of New Zealand to come. This concept referred to an imagined future New Zealand where local landscape was familiar rather than strange, and the nation could be seen as a home rather than a periphery.[22] In the case of McCahon, the Promised Land paradigm was foundational to his Christian beliefs. It also, quite clearly, captured the spirit of his times. Referring to the mood of the nineteen-forties, Curnow describes McCahon as an artist "who wanted to save the world, but then so did everyone."[23] Similarly, Brown declares that it is difficult to separate the Biblical vision of the Promised Land from "the political desire for a land that promises hope of security and abundance."[24] These desires were shared by many of the new nationalists, who found a useful metaphor in this increasingly secularised Biblical term.

The notion of the Promised Land has also fuelled talk of McCahon as a prophet, drawing on Biblical allusions. For example, Pound explains that "one of the most persistent patterns of New Zealand's Nationalist high culture" is to "speak of a flight from England—the place of captivity—towards the Promised Land."[25] He argues that the insertion of 'high culture' into New Zealand was a task of great suffering, ritually enacted by 'prophets' such as McCahon and Allen Curnow.[26] There are also subtle allusions to the story of Moses, which is often conflated with McCahon's own prophethood. Pound writes, "[i]n their every painting or poem, in their every utterance on the perpetual flight, the Nationalist artists are burdened with a responsibility towards this Promised Land to come."[27] This was a burden that McCahon would feel deeply. Although his vision of the Promised Land begins with optimism, McCahon's prophetic journey did not end with delivery into a greater homeland.

This version of New Zealand nationalism, despite seeking a glorious Promised Land, was not a discourse of aggrandisement or aggression.[28] It is dissimilar to many other nationalistic philosophies around the globe. As such, Wystan Curnow warns against an unqualified correlation between McCahon's image of the Promised Land and nationalism in its most commonly understood sense.[29] Nationalism is a discourse and mindset that is often engaged in the pursuit of elevating the state, something that generally requires positive language and outlook. In contrast, Paul Williams notes that nationalism in New Zealand "tended to produce self-critical rather than idolatrous results" by virtue of its references to loss, isolation, and loneliness.[30] Thus it is fitting that McCahon often depicted uncomfortable and intense scenes of primal landscape and scripture, and

implied that cultural construction was a laborious task. McCahon's early paintings came out of the post-war period and reveal a desire for the establishment of a peaceful nation, largely disconnected from visions of the global.[31] In direct contrast to aggressive border disputes, McCahon suggests that the abiding and melancholic love of one's homeland is the true way of forging a connection to territory.

The language of anguish is evident throughout McCahon's oeuvre. Constructing culture was, for various reasons, described as being wrought with pain. Horrocks employs the emotive phrase "anxiety rituals" to discuss this manufacturing of identity.[32] In 1945, Allen Curnow complained that New Zealand lacked the capacity for tragic emotions and laid blame, in part, on a tendency to hide behind "the maternal screen of England."[33] It follows that to move away from this emotionally stunting dependence on colonial origins is to evoke a greater focus on tragedy. Calder explains, perhaps less romantically, "[i]f migration ought to have led to an identity crisis rather than to colonial complacency, then poets of the 1930s or 40s produced those crises as a kind of belated couvade."[34] This sympathetic agony was used as a means of exploring a crisis of selfhood and reconciling the problems of dwelling within an unfamiliar land, such as feelings of homesickness and nostalgia.[35] Indeed, Allen Curnow speaks of the shock of migration and the "trap closing behind" the early settlers.[36] Pain was also located in the supposed barrenness of the country and its culture.[37] In keeping with this, poetic descriptions were not always of a resplendent countryside. Allen Curnow speaks of the "great gloom" that "[s]tands in a land of settlers/With never a soul at home."[38] This is comparable to McCahon's *Northland Panels* (1958) lament: "oh yes it can be dark here and manuka in bloom may breed despair."

Various critics, authors, and artists have identified the colonial absence of authenticity as a national marker. Pound writes that the "intolerable silence and emptiness" of colonial New Zealand was due to the absence of an authentically local form of expression. The construction of culture could relieve this "agony."[39] Brasch's 'The Silent Land' (1945) calls out for this kind of authentic communication: "the plains are nameless and the cities cry for meaning/The unproved heart still seeks a vein of speech."[40] Thus pain was located both in the pre-constructed culture of New Zealand and in the process of constructing it. Allen Curnow speaks of creating "the anti-myth about New Zealand," in contradistinction to the narratives told in the nation's older days.[41] There was struggle in overthrowing the old systems of expression, which were often associated with the centrality of the United Kingdom.

Notable Omissions of the Nationalist Project

The Nationalist Project is an ideology under which some groups were excluded and others represented in a problematic manner. These issues of representation are inherited within McCahon's work and contribute significantly to his outlook as a participant in constructing the 'Promised Land'. In calling forth a discernable New Zealand 'type', the Nationalist Project tended to conduct a process of erasure.[42] Due to the emphasis on self-definition and self-determination, tourists are barred from this inwards-looking body of text and image. Rather than attempting to sell New Zealand to visitors, nationalist texts commonly strove to engage its actual inhabitants in a personal, nationalistic call to admire their homeland and bond with its non-European landforms. Brown illustrates a similar occurrence in his discussion of McCahon's *Plain With Winter Landscape* (1949). He states that this view of Canterbury is a "potentially popular, winning, familiar subject. Yet these are hardly the adjectives one would apply to McCahon's view of the scene."[43] Indeed, McCahon's rolling Canterbury hills are ghostly and the open plains before them feel more eerie than hospitable. Although his works have sometimes been perceived as beautiful, McCahon did not intend to render the landscape as a postcard or to sell it to an overseas audience.

McCahon described the Helensville area as "wild and beautiful; empty and utterly beautiful. This is, after all, the coast the Māori souls pass over on their way from life to death—to Spirits Bay." He emphasised that "I do not recommend any of this landscape as a tourist resort."[44] By rejecting the touristic gaze, McCahon was able to focus on a truly local vision for a very specific audience.[45] This is also a way in which McCahon contributed to the aforementioned rejection of the nostalgia for the United Kingdom.[46] He worried that too many citizens were caught up in a "kind of looking backwards" in which constant comparisons to this supposed 'homeland' were made.[47] McCahon complained of the popular tendency to compare Dunedin with Scotland. Conversely, he was pleased with the general acceptance of Northland as "uniquely New Zealand."[48] McCahon hoped to inspire a similar understanding of the rest of the country by abandoning this nostalgic drive towards a colonial gaze where 'home' was still abroad.

A more problematic omission is that of the Māori history of New Zealand. As Pound demonstrates, nationalist discourse presented New Zealand as "a pastless and voiceless country."[49] The Nationalist Movement often employed the British colonisation of New Zealand as its cultural commencement, privileging Pākehā[50] as those who could define the land. The origins of New Zealand as a nation are often tied to the

moment of ‘landfall’.[51] This term refers to sighting or reaching land after a journey at sea, epitomising the pre-eminence of a coloniser’s mindset.[52] Although pioneering Māori also arrived by sea, ‘landfall’ in this context is used to describe European arrival in New Zealand. In addition to its favoured terminology, the employment of nationalistic poetry as a defining feature of New Zealand identity is exclusive in and of itself. Because Māori history was recorded orally, New Zealand was considered to be a land without a literary tradition due to a dominant Western taxonomy that privileges written sources.[53] This narrow vision of what constitutes the commencement and the nature of New Zealand culture is heavily grounded in a Western paradigm that excludes traditional indigenous modes of expression.[54]

This does not mean that Māori were ignored in the construction of Pākehā culture. Rather, they were often presented in a Romanticised manner for Pākehā benefit.[55] Indigenous words and motifs have frequently been employed as a point of difference between New Zealand and British culture.[56] In the poem ‘Forerunners’, for example, Brasch pays tribute to the idea of a people in New Zealand before the Pākehā. “Offering soil for our rootless behaviour,”[57] these ancestors are romanticised as having a deeper and more organic relationship with the land. Leonhard Emmerling believes that McCahon’s tributes to the indigenous population represented a desire to construct a New Zealand that was “cured of the pain, rifts, and injustices which the process of colonisation brought in its wake.”[58] Despite good intentions, this is substantially problematic. Expressing just one way in which romanticisation of the Māori past is controversial, Calder writes that “[i]n New Zealand, forms of nationalism would continue to operate under this double injunction: to forget the past even as we seek to remember its wrongs.”[59] In this mindset, injustices are forgiven and utilised by the colonisers who caused them. The overarching problem is a lack of agency ascribed to the Māori voice, with Pākehā free to pick and choose from indigenous culture as they see fit.

Women of all ethnicities are also largely absent from the rhetoric of the Nationalist Project. Calder notes that the quest for identity is often constructed in gendered terms with the land as female and the explorer as male.[60] In this paradigm, women are represented as object and men as subject. A prime example is ‘The Silent Land’ in which “So relenting, earth will tame her tamer” after he lies with the hills “like a lover.”[61] While some artists such as Rita Angus and Doris Lusk, and poets such as Robin Hyde and Miss Duggan,[62] were able to contribute a unique voice, this was still done so in an approach to regionalism that stems from a patriarchal model. Pound calls it a “phallic rhetoric, a rhetoric of hard men

in hard light on hard land."[63] This seems to leave a very limited place for the female, existing either as conquered landscape or ingénue without voice. The Nationalist Project was mainly a discourse of Caucasian males, often aligned with a masculine deity.

McCahon assisted in making New Zealand a centre and a home as opposed to a mere British periphery. He also interacted with a discourse of ownership in which identity is formed via an emotional possession of New Zealand to mirror its actual colonisation.[64] What this identity is founded upon is deeply revealing of McCahon's artistic and social context. From the Nationalist Project he inherited a tendency to discuss the pain that came from colonial guilt, disconnection, and the frustrations of trying to create a culture. Most importantly, he found the socio-spiritual project of the Promised Land, the anxiety of its failure, and its exclusion of certain voices. McCahon's messages of peace, pain, and construction all emerge from this wave of cultural autonomy, which is central to his output and his vision.

Religion in New Zealand

To understand the context of McCahon's beliefs and their categorisation, it is important to examine the history of Christianity and its reception in New Zealand.[65] Christianity is the country's nominal religion; descriptions of belief in New Zealand, which pre-date the era of the New Age and secularisation, read as a history of Christian denominations.[66] Despite this, actual participation rates have always been remarkably low.[67] Although Christianity is the largest faith in New Zealand today, and unites communities of different ethnicities, Paul Morris argues "national life has always been lived outside and apart from the Christian institutions" that would ensure its cultural dominance.[68] Christianity, as expressed through organised institutions, sits uncomfortably with the long-term religious attitude of New Zealand.[69] This does not mean, however, that Christianity is absent from New Zealand culture.[70] Nor should it imply that the perceptions of this faith have been static over time. Morris, Harry Ricketts and Grimshaw ask that we "expand the notion of religion beyond a narrow doctrinal frame and the portals of the Church" in order to reveal its true presence in this nation. They feel that New Zealand is not necessarily a secular country, but rather one with unique expressions of spirituality that are often lost through strict definitions of faith.[71] This is because Christianity has often manifested in non-institutionalised contexts.

One of these is the realm of literature. Morris, Ricketts, and Grimshaw note that—despite New Zealand's apparent secularity—poetry in this