

The Spirit of Colin McCahon. By Zoe Alderton. Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. xiii + 380 pp. (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4438-7232-4.

This book is the published version of Zoe Alderton's doctoral thesis. Her subject, Colin McCahon (1919–1987), is an iconic New Zealand artist, who held a special, idiosyncratic, version of Christianity that informed his artistic practice. McCahon has a particular place in contemporary New Zealand, one that is controversial and contested. For every critic who praises McCahon there are a dozen bloggers and journalists who attack the value of his art, from questioning his capacity to draw to asking if his faith invalidates his canvases or makes them unsuitable to hang in secular art galleries. Alderton redresses a significant lack in scholarship on McCahon, and has authored what is to date the authoritative monograph on the famously difficult artist. Alderton's approach is multi-methodological, with each chapter addressing a particular issue in the development of McCahon's art. The first three chapters situate Alderton's project: they are an introduction, an analysis of McCahon and religion (effectively Christianity), and a discussion of his artistic genre, which situates his oeuvre in the context of his contemporaries, including Toss Woollaston (1910–1998) and Rita Angus (1908–1970).

Chapter 4, "A Foundation of Scripture," and chapter 5, "A Foundation of Landscape," address the close connections between the natural beauty of New Zealand, the Biblical text, and McCahon's own biography. His portrayal of friends as Biblical characters (he often painted his neighbour Marjorie Naylor as Mary, for example), and his commitment to the portrayal of Jesus Christ's saving death in the local landscape are sensitively treated. McCahon's environmental concerns and passionate love of his country, which he painted as both strong and fragile, are chronicled, and his personal struggles with alcoholism and his (certain, yet uncertain) faith are revealed in his papers and letters to friends. He presented himself as a prophet, a voice crying in the wilderness, like St John the Baptist, and Alderton explains how McCahon's message was often misinterpreted or simply failed to hit its target. Chapter 6, "Necessary Protection at Muriwai," examines the *Necessary Protection* series from the 1970s, which combines the geography of Muriwai with the symbol of the Tau cross in an extraordinarily powerful landscape sequence.

McCahon's love of the coastal scenery and the sea is further explored in chapter 7, "Walks and Numerals," which explores how McCahon connected Māori ideas with Christianity: for example, he links "the Māori walk to the afterlife with the Stations of the Cross, based on the journey Christ took before his execution" (p. 163). This chapter examines artworks that have a beach walk at core, and series like *Clouds* and *Teaching Aids*, in which numbers play a major part in the compositions, also from the 1970s. Chapter 8, "Moses and Māori Culture," goes

deeper into McCahon's interest in the culture of the Indigenous people of New Zealand, particularly in terms of the idea of nationhood, and of the Pākehā (White) invasion of Aotearoa ("land of the long white cloud"), and the conversion of the Māori to Christianity, a process that stimulated Indigenous prophets like Te Whiti O Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi of the Parihaka community in Taranaki. They "connected the Māori people to the Hebrews and . . . correlated the Bible to New Zealand, comparing the twelve tribes of Israel with the twelve tribes of Taranaki and Waikato" (p. 193). Alderton examines paintings including the *Parihaka Triptych* (1972), which McCahon painted for an exhibition on Te Whiti, and the *Urewera Mural* (1975), in which the Urewera hills are dominated by a huge central figure, a Tau cross variously interpreted as Christ and the Māori ancestor Tane Atua. As Alderton notes, "The mural is a small theatre of a complex national debate over land ownership, dispossession, and the right to cultural appropriation" (p. 201).

Chapter 9, "Gates and Waterfalls," further examines how McCahon relocates Christ to New Zealand, and works through barriers to entering and possessing the Promised Land. The *Waterfall* and *Gate* series are earlier in his development, dating from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s. Chapter 10, "The Word Paintings," discusses works produced when McCahon was a very famous artist, and in which there are white letters painted onto a black background. A prominent word motif is "I AM" from the Bible, in which it is the self-designation of God when asked who he is by Moses in *Exodus* 3: 13–15. God's response is "I am that I am." There are expressions of grave doubt in these large late paintings, and they are hated and loved by more or less equal numbers of viewers. Chapter 11, "The Final Warnings," analyses works filled with doubt like *The Emptiness of All Endeavour* (1980), *I Considered All the Acts of Oppression* (1981), and *Storm Warning* (1980). His faith and doubt, artistic genius and critical vilification, and deep personal sense of failure, combined with alcoholism, are carefully outlined. There are two Appendices, on McCahon's posthumous reputation and on series and repetitions in his oeuvre.

This book is a highly informative and clearly written, and Alderton deserves praise for evoking the works of McCahon via textual description, as she was unable to gain permission from the artist's estate to reproduce any of the works. This book should be read by all who are interested in the role of Christianity in twentieth-century art, in art as mediation between colonialists and Indigenous peoples, and in the religious impulse for contemporary artists. It merits a large and appreciative audience.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney