

Station to Station: Colin McCahon's *Veronica* paintings, 1949–1979

PETER SIMPSON

Abstract

The Stations of the Cross were a recurrent motif in Colin McCahon's art. This article focuses on the one Station which he singled out for particular emphasis: Station 6: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. The paper argues that for McCahon the Stations were a kind of matrix, grid or armature, a structure within which he could explore various religious and aesthetic ideas. The appeal of Veronica derives from the possibilities inherent in the image of Christ's face on her veil or handkerchief as a symbol both of religious truth and aesthetic exploration; in McCahon's work she becomes a kind of patron saint of painters.

Colin McCahon only ever painted one work he actually entitled *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*. Dated 1966, it is painted in acrylics on 14 sheets of paper each of which depicts a simplified landscape, symbolically representative of one of the 14 stations, which are numbered and listed at the bottom of each sheet.



Figure 1. *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, 1966.

Synthetic polymers on 14 sheets of paper on cardboard, each 750 × 555 mm.

Auckland Art Gallery (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

However, there are many other works by McCahon which allude either explicitly or implicitly to the stations, ranging in date between 1949 and 1979: in total, over 150 stations-related works. It is one of the most pervasive motifs in McCahon's output, especially during the period 1973–1977.

Broadly speaking, the stations served a double purpose for McCahon. On the one hand, they provided him with a traditionally sanctioned way of focusing on the central tenets of Christian belief, the death of Jesus through his crucifixion and thereby the possibility for mankind of redemption and salvation. On the other hand, the stations provided McCahon with a “structure,” a “grid,” a “story” (all quoted below) through which to explore his artistic intentions—a way of making paintings.

It had been my original intention to survey the whole body of stations-related work but it quickly became apparent that the topic was much too big for a single article, so I have reduced the scope of my study largely to McCahon's interest in just one of the 14 stations, number 6 in the traditional sequence: “Veronica wipes the face of Jesus,” or (to use another form of words which McCahon employed) “His face is wiped by Veronica.” There are six works in which the name “Veronica” appears in the title and many others which allude to the sixth station either explicitly or implicitly, that is, within the context of the stations as a whole. The eight explicit references to Veronica occur in works painted in 1949 (twice), 1966 (twice), 1973, 1976, 1977

and 1979, a spread of thirty years. None of the other 14 stations were singled out by McCahon for such repeated attention. To the best of my knowledge he never explained this exceptional focus on Veronica, but the likely reason is that it brought together simultaneously both his spiritual and aesthetic concerns and resulted in images that symbolized both faith in God and the art of painting itself.

Before proceeding further, we need to remind ourselves what is meant by the Stations of the Cross. It is a sequence of (normally) fourteen images recording the events of the last day of the earthly life of Jesus Christ—from being condemned to death to being laid in the tomb after his crucifixion—as widely practised in Christian churches, especially but not exclusively Roman Catholic. The form of the 14 stations which McCahon followed is as follows:

1. Jesus is condemned to death
2. Jesus carries His cross
3. Jesus falls for the first time
4. Jesus meets His mother, Mary
5. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus
7. Jesus falls for the second time
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falls for the third time
10. Jesus is stripped of His clothes
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies on the cross
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross
14. Jesus is placed in the tomb

Most but not all of the stations originate from gospel accounts of the events leading up to the Crucifixion and its aftermath.¹ Originally, the practice began in the Holy Land as pilgrims sought out in Jerusalem the locations associated with Christ's passion. The earliest use of the term "stations" to describe the devotional practice of re-enacting Christ's final journey was apparently in a narrative of William Wey (c. 1407–1476), an English pilgrim to Jerusalem.² Eventually, the Franciscan order, with whom this form of devotion was closely associated, built a series of outdoor shrines in Europe to replicate their counterparts in the Holy Land. By the seventeenth century the practice of erecting stations within Franciscan churches became established throughout Europe and was given papal approval; in the eighteenth century the right to construct stations and to grant indulgences was extended to all Catholic churches.³ In 1731 Pope Clement XII definitively fixed the number of stations at 14. Prior to that the number had ranged widely from seven to fifteen. Incidentally, Veronica was not named a saint until late in the nineteenth century.

In 1949, McCahon made his first explicit reference to the Stations of the Cross in a letter to his friend and patron Charles Brasch. "And am working on the full 14 Stations of the Cross & hope to have them all ready for Auckland—the painting as yet is not begun only the first discoveries."⁴ However, only two paintings *Saint Veronica*, and *Saint Veronica's Handkerchief* (both dated 1949) from the period of this early comment relate indisputably to the Stations of the Cross, though several *Crucifixions* and other works from 1949 may also be connected to this uncompleted scheme.

How is this initial interest in the stations to be explained? Partly through McCahon's absorption in the religious art of the Renaissance, which he learned about largely through books in the Dunedin Public Library, especially Phaidon publications about Titian, Bellini and Sieneese painting.⁵ Also, in Christchurch in 1948 he spent time with two contemporaries who were much preoccupied with Catholicism: the academic and novelist Bill Pearson and the poet James K. Baxter. Pearson recalls of his friendship with Baxter: "We were drawn to the security and conviction that religious orthodoxy offered, envying the Middle Ages their simplicity of belief. . . . [Jim] was received into the Church of England, but it did not surprise me years later . . . that he turned Catholic."⁶ When McCahon also turned up in Christchurch he joined Pearson and Baxter in drinking sessions in Christchurch pubs, at which poems were read, paintings unrolled and religion frequently discussed.⁷ It is possible McCahon's interest in the stations as a theme arose from these sessions. After his childhood Presbyterianism, McCahon avoided any particular doctrinal or institutional association. Baxter will turn up again later in this story.

In focusing on Veronica, McCahon contributed to a long tradition in Christian art. Veronica has no origin in scripture; largely a product of Medieval Catholic mythology, she was revered as a woman of Jerusalem who wiped the face of Jesus carrying his cross towards Golgotha with her veil or kerchief, whereupon the image of his face was miraculously imprinted on the cloth. Some suggest that the name "Veronica" itself comes from the Latin "vera icon," true image, which somehow over time got transferred from the imprinted veil to the woman herself.⁸

The supposed existence of a cloth imprinted with the image of Christ's face was known from the eighth century and became an object of veneration in Rome. The holy relic (not to be confused with the Shroud of Turin) is still to this day held at the Vatican. In painting, images of St. Veronica and her veil began to appear from the early fifteenth century, among the earliest being those by Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1440–1455), Hans Memling (c. 1470–1475) and the Master of Veronica (Cologne, early fifteenth century).

McCahon was probably familiar with them. Other well-known artists who treated the subject were Jacopo Bassano, Hieronymus Bosch, Lorenzo Costa, Guido Reni, Francisco de Zurbaran, and El Greco who, as McCahon did nearly four centuries later, painted versions both of Veronica holding the veil and of the veil itself around 1580.



Figure 2. El Greco, *St. Veronica*, c.1580. Oil on canvas, Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, Spain.

Among modern artists, the most likely to have influenced McCahon's 1949 *Saint Veronica* is Georges Rouault (1871–1958). There is nothing in any McCahon correspondence I have seen to link McCahon directly with Rouault, though his close friend Baxter mentioned Rouault in an unpublished poem addressed to McCahon (in response to the gift of a painting) in 1952:

Roua[u]lt has seen, better indeed than most,
The face of suffering in the dirty slum
Transfigured. . . .⁹

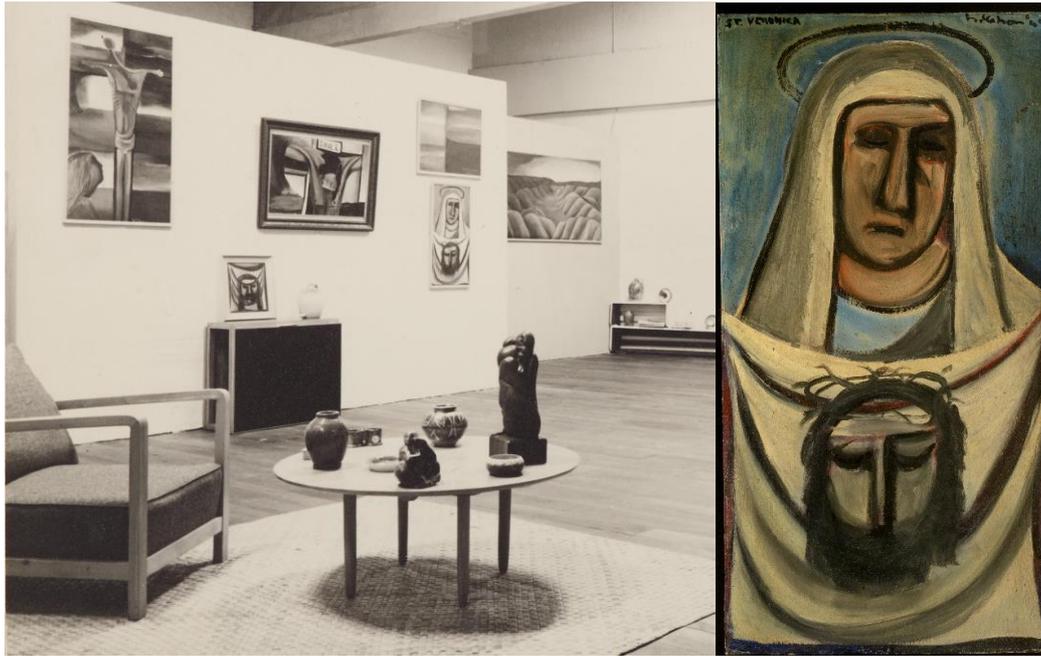
Rouault made many versions of St. Veronica and her veil, as paintings, in stained glass and in print media, including in his well-known series *Miserere*. The appeal to McCahon of Rouault, who was indisputably modern yet seemingly committed, like McCahon, to dealing seriously with subjects traditional in Christian art, is obvious. McCahon certainly saw prints and paintings by Rouault in Melbourne in 1951, and Auckland City Art Gallery (where McCahon worked between 1953 and 1964), acquired prints by him (including *Miserere*) in the 1950s. They exhibited his work in 1957, 1965, 1977 and 1983.



Figure 3. Georges Rouault, Plate 33 from *Miserere*, 1928. Aquatint.

McCahon's *Saint Veronica* is less innocent-looking than Rouault's figure. Her face, the features boldly outlined in black, is bleak, tear-stained and grieving, her head surmounted by a white veil and crowned with a simple black halo against a background of dull blue. Half the picture is taken up with the veil and its image. The head of Christ could almost be a death mask; his eyes are closed or downcast; he is full bearded with a crown of thorns. Looping black folds are prominent on the white veil. The depiction points towards a tragic rather than a redemptive or triumphal reading of the Crucifixion and the events leading up to it.

This work was first exhibited at an exhibition at Helen Hitchings Gallery in Wellington in July 1949. Also exhibited was a much smaller work (c. 30 × 25 cm) called *Saint Veronica's Handkerchief*, which unfortunately is either lost or destroyed. McCahon described the lost work in a letter to Ron O'Reilly as "a tiny St. Veronica's handkerchief with the face seen as through bars made by the folds of the cloth" a description which largely holds for the veil depicted in the larger work.¹⁰ The two paintings can be seen together in a contemporary photograph of the exhibition.



Figures 4-5. Left: detail of photograph by John Ashton, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, showing Helen Hitchings Gallery, Wellington, 1949. Photograph includes Colin McCahon, *Saint Veronica's Handkerchief*, 1949. Oil on canvas (leaning on dresser); and *Saint Veronica*, 1949. Oil on cardboard. Right: Colin McCahon, *Saint Veronica*, 1949. Oil on cardboard, Auckland Art Gallery (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

As far as one can tell from the tiny photographic images, the two faces appear to be almost identical, as in El Greco. In notes made at the time O'Reilly described the colour of this work as "yellow and grey."¹¹ Noticeable as often in McCahon's portraits of Christ is the strong T shape (or Tau cross) made by the eyebrows and nose, as if to suggest that his fate is literally written on his face.

In 1952, after returning from Australia where he had seen paintings and prints by Rouault in the National Gallery of Victoria, McCahon did a series of Rouault-like brush drawings which he made into an artist's book as a gift to Brasch (who had put up the money for his trip). Although (like Rouault's *Miserere*) not strictly a Stations of the Cross, the *15 Drawings* are a narrative of Christ's life and many of the subjects are shared with the traditional stations, including: Christ carrying the cross, the crucifixion and "he is laid in the tomb."¹²

Figurative renditions of biblical subjects were largely abandoned after 1953, when McCahon moved to Auckland, though religious subject matter reappeared in abstract and textual form in the important *Elias* series of 1959, painted after his career-changing visit to the USA in 1958, a series largely concerned with the crucifixion and the question of whether or not Christ was "saved."

In 1965 McCahon was commissioned by the architect James Hackshaw to provide painted windows for a chapel he designed for the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions in Upland Road, Remuera.¹³



Figures 6-7. Chapel of Our Lady of the Missions, Upland Road, Remuera, 1966.
Photographs by James Hackshaw.

The method McCahon used was rather rough and untested, simply painting directly on the windows with commercial alkyd paints as used by sign writers. Within a few years the windows began to deteriorate; only the East window survives (in radically conserved state) at Auckland Art Gallery.

It is important to understand that McCahon was not a Roman Catholic and never joined the church or any other denomination after his childhood Presbyterianism. He did (according to his son William) briefly take instruction in Catholicism in Auckland around 1959–1962 but by mutual agreement did not proceed to full membership.¹⁴ McCahon’s christianity was personal and non-institutional. “I could never call myself a Christian,” he wrote in 1972,¹⁵ while in 1981 he wrote: “I think I am a Christian—perhaps I am.”¹⁶ In making art for Catholic churches he did so not as a member of the church but as a freelance artist. Nevertheless, he was deeply interested in the history of christian art and in the symbolism and iconography of Catholicism which he needed to study up on in order to paint the chapel windows in Remuera. In this way he renewed his acquaintance with the Stations of the Cross—not of course an exclusively Roman Catholic phenomenon—and painted his first full version of the stations in 1966 for the interior west wall of the Remuera chapel. This work, called *The Way of the Cross*, a well-known alternative name for the stations, was not part of the original commission but was made independently and gifted by McCahon to the Sisters of Mercy. *The Way of the Cross*, painted on three hardboard panels which combined to around 6 metres in length, was hung in a mezzanine corridor beneath the west window.

In this work, the titles of the 14 stations are written sequentially on the surface of the painting, forming a significant element in the composition; other elements include the profile of a hilly landscape which rises and falls across the breadth of the panels. Most read this landscape as a cross section of the hilly Auckland isthmus from west to east including several of the region’s volcanic cones. Each station is represented by a double Maltese cross, one painted and one wooden, the latter appearing along the top edge of the picture. To some extent the painted crosses are differentiated, some are black, others are depicted in outline; the cross for the sixth station, “Veronica wipes the face of Jesus” is unique, the cross being depicted in outline against a dark square, clearly a symbolic representation of the image on the veil.

According to McCahon’s own account, while this painting was being worked on, he was simultaneously working on another version of the Stations of the Cross. He wrote to Charles

Brasch about both series in December 1966: “Also, have finished a set of Stations I’ve been working on most of the year, 14 separate panels—landscape in black & dirty pale yellow & grey. These possibly for Upland Rd. Have another set also from the last month on 3 panels designed for Upland Rd also, but much more unexpected—these form a continuous line across the wall—black on yellow, painted crosses & written messages. In both these series the landscape falls or rises with the story, lightens or darkens etc.”¹⁷

Although conceived for the Upland Road chapel, this other set of 14 panels was never installed there but was exhibited separately and eventually gifted to Auckland Art Gallery. In this set, the landscape imagery—sky, hill, plain—is dominant, the words for the stations being confined to tiny writing at the bottom of each sheet. There is a broad affinity between the landscape imagery and the station with which it is associated, according to the principle mentioned to Brasch: “the landscape falls or rises with the story, lightens or darkens etc.” Especially expressive are the sloping lines, single or double, forward or backward leaning, crossing the hillsides, as roads, ridges or waterfalls.

Those including lighter colours, “dirty yellow” rather than dark grey, tend to be the warmer, more empathetic, less tragic moments, including *No. 6: His Face is Wiped by Veronica*. Otherwise it is difficult to establish a precise connection between image and station, beyond the broad emotional parabola of the series.



Figure 8. Colin McCahon, *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross No. 6: His Face is Wiped by Veronica*, 1966. Synthetic polymers on paper on cardboard, Auckland Art Gallery (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

These two works were the first and last in which McCahon explicitly utilised the language of the 14 stations and made the words themselves a significant part of the work.

Apart from an isolated painting of around 1968–1970, entitled *Jesus Falls a Second Time*, foregrounding the number “7,” there is a gap of seven years between these two works of 1966 and McCahon’s next work engaging with the stations, a single work of 1973 called *A Handkerchief for St Veronica*. This work initiated a rich sequence of stations-related individual works and series which dominated McCahon’s practice for the next six years.

If any one event provoked this and a cluster of other stations-related works in 1973–1974 it was the death of the poet James K. Baxter in October 1972. Baxter, raised a Quaker but a convert to Catholicism, and in contrast to McCahon an active participant in church affairs, had died suddenly at 46 during a period when he and McCahon, previously great friends, were bitterly estranged. Baxter’s overt Catholicism probably contributed to McCahon’s associating his death explicitly with the Stations of the Cross. Immediately after his death, McCahon impulsively painted a work for Baxter’s widow, *Jim Passes the Northern Beaches* (1972), which seems to have triggered a new impulse in his work. He commented to his Wellington dealer Peter McLeavey that this small work had “opened up a new way of thinking about painting.” He continued: “I’ve hardly painted for 3 months now. I’m doing a big rethink on all sorts of things. I’ve been walking & looking. Not, really, not working.”¹⁸ Memorialising Baxter, and expiating the guilt and grief he felt, loomed large in this “new way” he was cogitating. It should be added here that in 1969 McCahon built a new studio at Muriwai on Auckland’s west coast, an environment which greatly affected his work over the next decade or so, including the Baxter memorials.

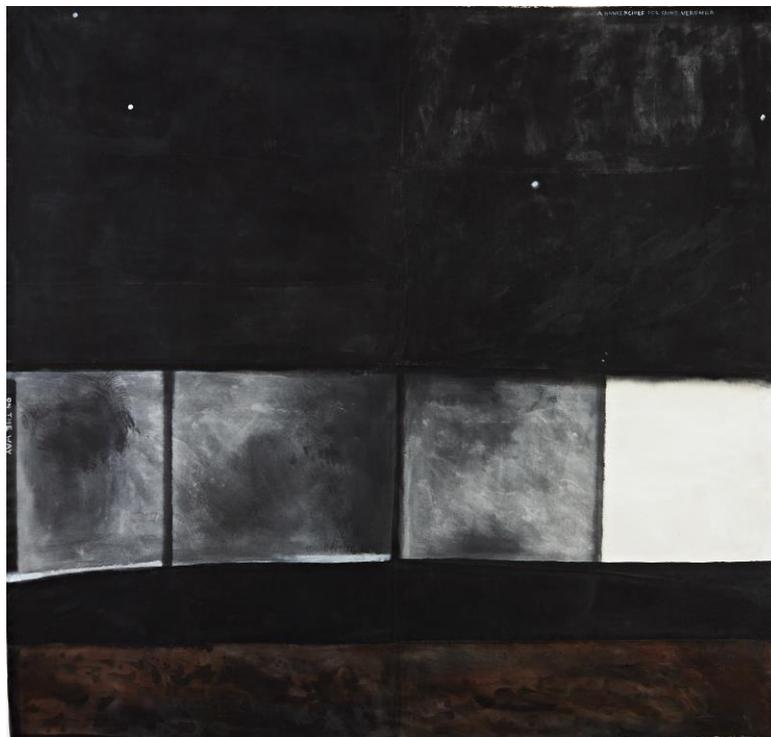


Figure 9. Colin McCahon. *A Handkerchief for St Veronica*, 1973. Synthetic polymers on unstretched canvas, private collection (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

Over Christmas/New Year in 1972–73 McCahon painted the large beautiful work on unstretched canvas called *A Handkerchief for St Veronica* in which the Muriwai/Kaipara night landscape becomes fused with the Stations of the Cross. He told Ron O'Reilly: "No painting since an odd & very large one at Xmas. This on a folded canvas—a St. Veronica's handkerchief. I'm moving in a new direction & so far don't know just where I'm moving."¹⁹

An inscription on *A Handkerchief* reads "Kaipara Flat—Looking West," referencing a rural district near Muriwai Beach bordering Kaipara Harbour. The implied view is out to the Tasman Sea, the shoreline visible only in the scumbled brown detritus in a strip across the bottom. Faint stars pierce the velvety blackness of the moonless night sky. In this work the stations are implied by the title—the unambiguous reference to St. Veronica—and by the sequence of rectangular "frames" spread across the canvas. Resembling a strip of film, the frames by implication extend before and after those visible, as suggested by the words "ON THE WAY" written vertically at the left edge (also referencing "The Way of the Cross"). Each frame, therefore (it can be inferred) is a "station," presumably from numbers three to six, Veronica's station—because the blazing white rectangle on the right would seem to represent her handkerchief yet to be imprinted with Jesus' face. This interpretation is supported by other related works; several 1973 drawings likewise employ four frames in a strip across the paper, and are inscribed "Work towards the first stations of the Cross."²⁰ Also, in the large work *A Piece of Muriwai Canvas: I am Walking North* (1973), such frames are associated with a walk along Muriwai beach. By analogy with *A Handkerchief for St Veronica*, these frames are associated with the stations, "the way."

In other works of 1973, this beach walk is specifically linked to the recently deceased Baxter and the Stations of the Cross but also with Māori mythology. A favourite myth for McCahon was the Māori belief that when people die their spirits pass up the western beaches of the North Island, including Muriwai and Ahipara, to Te Reinga (Cape Reinga) at the northern tip of the island. Māori believe that Te Reinga is the leaping off point for spirits returning to the ancestral Polynesian home of Hawaiki.²¹ McCahon associated this belief with Baxter who in his later years adopted the Māori name of Hemi, embraced Māoritanga, and who lived for much of his last years at Hiruharama [Jerusalem]—a remote Catholic/Māori settlement on the Whanganui River.

These themes or layers of meaning all coalesced in two works painted in 1973, both of which combine references to Muriwai landscapes, Māori beliefs, the death of Baxter and the Stations of the Cross. These works are *Series A* (14 panels, 1973), and *Walk (Series C)* (11 panels, 1973), the former shown at Barry Lett's in Auckland in August, the latter at Peter McLeavey's in Wellington in September 1973. He mentioned these exhibitions in letters to friends, including Patricia France: "I've been painting a big series on J.K. Baxter. 14 Panels—all sizes: 'Stations of the Cross' from black & white to violet to yellow, huge & rough & beautiful, I think [*Series A*]. I may well be wrong about that one. It's taken me about 4 months of very hard work. It can still flop. I'm doing another series following these all cool & cold [*Walk (Series C)*]."²²

In *Series A* the sole indication of the relationship to the stations is the number of works in the series—14. Number six is one of the few with a vertical element, a white column between two black areas; perhaps the upright of a cross, but not easy to connect specifically with Veronica. *Walk (Series C)* differs from *Series A* in that numbers signifying the stations do appear on the canvases. This is the first time that this device, which became commonplace in McCahon's work, was adopted—that is, to signify the 14 stations by a sequence of numbers. In this case

the numbers are in Roman numerals along the bottom edge of the paintings, but do not precisely correspond to the numbers of the panels, of which there are eleven not fourteen (as in *Series A*); in some panels, such as the first one, which includes a marine landscape and a large black Tau cross, there are two stations signified. Number 6 is the fourth panel. It is a long landscape showing a beach scene under white-out conditions with the word “walk” inscribed at the bottom. Is there any direct connection with Veronica? I suppose the white-out could be analogous to the whiteness of her handkerchief, but that is probably stretching things a bit.

From this point in his career onwards, McCahon references the Stations of the Cross in either of the ways, as represented by *Series A* and *Walk (Series C)*:

- 1) By designating the number of works in a particular series as fourteen as in *Series A*. This is the case with three later series: *Noughts and Crosses* (1976), involving two sub-series of seven; *Rocks in the Sky* (1976), also two sub-series of seven; and *Angels and Bed* (1976–1977).
- 2) By inscribing the numbers 1 to 14 either (a) with all the numbers on each individual canvas, as in *Walk with Me* (1974), two versions; *Teaching Aids* (1975), 3 versions; *Clouds* (1975), 10 versions; or (b) distributing the numbers 1 to 14 across a sequence of panels, constituting a single work, as in *Series C*; *The Song of the Shining Cuckoo* (1974); and *On the Road* (1976).

Since there isn't space to discuss these works in detail I will make just a few general observations.

- 1) How important is the number 14 in series which do not otherwise refer to the stations, like, say *Noughts and Crosses*? Probably not all that much, except in so far as it defines the process of prayer and ritualised meditation as the governing context of the series. It is also a useful measure for how long a sequence should be.
- 2) McCahon, a kind of amateur numerologist, liked numbers for their own sake, as abstract shapes, as sign systems, and as opportunities for symbolic elaboration. In the stations works he shifts apparently arbitrarily between Arabic numerals and Roman numerals, sometimes combining the two and sometimes also using the written English form of words. In *The Shining Cuckoo* and *Walk with Me*, the numbers are all Roman; in *Teaching Aids* and *On the Road*, they are mostly Arabic plus some written words. *Clouds* is a series that uses mostly Arabic, but occasionally Roman, numbers.
- 3) The importance of the stations as a kind of armature or “grid” to hang things on. This was articulated in several letters to O'Reilly. On 8 October 1973: “The ‘Stations of the Cross’ must not be taken just as that. I was using a form to try hold something else rather different.”²³ Or again in 1977: “The form is, as almost always now, the Stations of the Cross & is intended to be read as such. I work in to & out from a given form & do not invent the form, I accept it as right & true. I accept the freedoms it gives me & take no others.”²⁴ And in another letter he refers to the stations as a kind of grid: “Please don't get too hung up on grids. I paint what the story I'm using dictates. I don't analyse Mondrian's grids. I see the angels he saw and I see the subjects of big paintings very clearly. Grids can contain honey—also help to keep drawing clean. They are built for practical use. . . . It's the story with Mondrian & myself that is of first importance. The grid is to hang it on. Think of Giotto and comic books—in both cases grids hold mice

& cats & dogs & cats ducks saints sinners animals & trees rocks & at all times a story—always an important truth. . . . This is the thing I teach & only this How to build form to hold a story.”²⁵

After *A Handkerchief for St Veronica* (1973), the next work with a title that alludes explicitly to St. Veronica was part of the *Rocks in the Sky* series of 1976. Among all McCahon’s series relating to the stations this one is unique in that it combines both ways in which such series connected to the stations. First, it comprises 14 items (like *Angels and Bed*), arranged as two sets of seven (like *Noughts and Crosses*), but also, second (like *Teaching Aids*, or *Clouds*), each individual sheet (with one exception) carries all the numbers 1–14, sometimes all in Arabic numerals (6 times), sometimes all in Roman numerals (3 times), and occasionally as a combination of both (4); in one case Arabic numbers are combined with English words.

Again like *Noughts and Crosses*, the origin of the series was in the artist’s transaction with a grandchild, in this case a child’s comment that storm clouds driving in from the Tasman looked like “rocks in the sky.”²⁶ Through subject matter there is an obvious connection to *Clouds*, but whereas the *Clouds* were all in vertical (“portrait”) format, *Rocks in the Sky* are all in horizontal “landscape” format. Indeed, McCahon advised O’Reilly on one occasion: “Look at some horizontal clouds—perhaps the best.”²⁷

Panels 1 to 7 of *Series 1*, feature the rocks/clouds in all but the first panel. In an upper zone appear seven or eight clouds each carrying a number in various spatial arrangements; in a lower band are the rest of the numbers in sequential order. In *Series 2*, the rocks/clouds appear only in *No. 1: Veronica*, and disappear from the rest of the sequence, making the title, *Rocks in the Sky*, seem even more oblique. The geometry is more complex in *Series 2*, there being several horizontal bands, usually four, instead of the two in *Series 1*; the bands alternate dark and light with the numbers in contrasting colour; also the numbering is more various in form and arrangement than in *Series 1*, and there are more landscape (mostly beach and horizon) connotations. Colour is used sparingly throughout, being confined to black, white and occasionally ochre.

Turning specifically to *Series 2, No. 1: Veronica*, it is one of several which have a subtitle, though the only one with a subtitle related to the stations; the other subtitles are more environmental such as *Lagoon*, or *Seagulls. Rain*. It is the only one of *Series 2* to retain the “rocks”/clouds imagery of *Series 1*, two rocks on the top band of four, either side of the Roman numeral I. Between the two “rocks” comes One (or is it I), dark on a light square against the dark band. Could this be an image of Veronica’s handkerchief, the dark mark on a light ground? The second band is white with the single number V dark against it; or could the “V” here be not the Roman number but the letter of the alphabet “V,” standing for Veronica? In Roman numbering V and I together make VI = Six, Veronica’s number. Is that intended? These are mysteries whose interpretation will vary from viewer to viewer, as McCahon hoped for and expected. The line between the second and third band is distinctly horizon-like. In the third band the numbers in Roman form from II to IX are light on a dark ground; note that V and VI are repeated. In the fourth band (which doesn’t extend the full width) the numbers X to XIV are dark against a light band. The painting is beautiful but enigmatic in connotation; it combines landscape, abstraction, numbers and symbolism in a mix that is peculiarly McCahon’s.

The last series by McCahon to make explicit or implicit reference to the Stations of the Cross was *Angels and Bed* (1976–1977). Again, like *Series A* and *Noughts and Crosses* it was only the total number of works in the series—14—which directly linked the series to the stations, plus one further detail: one of the fourteen works has the subtitle *Veronica*. While working on

the series, McCahon wrote about it to O'Reilly in a manner that greatly illuminates not just this series but his treatment of the stations throughout the 1970s. He wrote: "The first three . . . are all very personal statements, the big one (Hi Fi) in a way opens the sequence & from there to 14 ('the last one') the feeling changes. The first three are very private messages, the rest, public." Then comes the comment already quoted: "The form is, as almost always now, the Stations of the Cross & is intended to be read as such. . . . From 'the big one' to the end there is only the story of 'the way'—& that way is born with us but is to be looked for still."²⁸

Some explanations are in order. The first three *Angels and Bed* paintings were painted for close friends who were ill or injured, Rodney Kennedy (one of his oldest friends), Peter McLeavey (his Wellington dealer), and Dr. Walter Auburn.²⁹ These three paintings establish the basic form of the series, a number of white or light coloured rectangles against a black ground, the largest rectangle at bottom centre representing, in McCahon's diagrammatic or cartoon-like symbolism, the bed of illness and pain, while the white rectangles around the edges are the "angels," hovering presences attending, caring for the bed-ridden patient. *Angels and Bed No. 4: Hi Fi*, was enormous, an unstretched canvas measuring 3.4 by 5.3 metres, McCahon generally referred to it as "the big one"; from there the rest of the sequence reverted to the regular Steinbach sheets of paper, in which McCahon played his usual variations on the colour, size, placement and number of the white on black rectangles.

The basic imagery of the series derives from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which in 1953 McCahon had designed a production of. Peer, the exile, returns home to find his mother on her deathbed and persuades her the bed is a chariot riding her to heaven. *Veronica* is *No. 5* in the sequence (not six as is standard), immediately following "the big one," and is itself followed by *Close* and *Watch*. Do any particulars of the fifth panel associate it particularly with St. Veronica? Certainly the "bed" is exquisitely painted, and far from being a blank white space; could it figure also as a cloth carrying a divine image? Justin Paton has usefully suggested that McCahon's late "Veronica" paintings are less images of Veronica than paintings *for* her as tributes to a kind of prototypical image maker, like a painter, who also aims to inscribe transformative images onto cloth.³⁰ In this reading Veronica becomes a kind of patron saint of painters, those who deal in images of truth and beauty on cloth.



Figure 10. Colin McCahon, *Angels and Bed No. 5: Veronica*, 1977. Synthetic polymers on paper, private collection (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

As I mentioned before, *Angels and Bed* was the last series evoking the Stations of the Cross but it was not the last Veronica painting. That came as part of a small series called *The Five Wounds of Christ* (1978–1979). There were three of these which came into being as a result of a commission from McCahon's Wellington dealer, Peter McLeavey. Neither of the first two is named, but the third and last is clearly labelled *Veronica* on a dark band at the top.

Like the stations, the Five Wounds are a form of Catholic devotion, and refer to the wounds in Christ's hands and feet from being nailed to the cross and the wound in his side from being lanced. There are similarities in imagery to the *Angels and Bed* paintings, the wounds being signified by marks around the periphery of the pictures, either rectangles or short horizontal lines. In *The Five Wounds of Christ No. 3: Veronica* there are four white rectangles and a horizontal line. The wounds are also signified by a series of white dots, as on rosary beads. In one instance these resulted from the accidental spilling of the artist's own blood, an occurrence which he retained and copied onto the other two works.³¹ A striking feature of *The Five Wounds of Christ No. 3: Veronica* is the band of scalloped white clouds stretching from edge to edge above the cross and below the dark band which carries the title. This has the effect of locating the painting within a landscape and thence within the narrative of the Crucifixion, whatever other symbolic connotations it may possess.



Figure 11. Colin McCahon, *The Five Wounds of Christ No. 3: Veronica*, 1977–1978. Synthetic polymers on unstretched canvas, Dunedin Public Art Gallery (courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust).

And why Veronica? In this instance, since the work occurs outside the usual context of the stations, the whole painting is perhaps equivalent to Veronica's transfigured handkerchief, bearing the image of Christ not figuratively but symbolically in the form of the Latin cross, here white on black not black on white. It is both a spiritual statement and an aesthetic one; a meditation on Christ and the significance of his "wounds," but also a celebration like the other Veronica paintings completed over a thirty year period of the medium of painting itself, the art of transforming cloth by pigment and honest human effort into lasting images of beauty and truth.

McCahon's exceptional penchant, among his overtly religious paintings, for the theme of Veronica and her veil signifies his search for a theme which enabled him to combine his habitual subject "which is God & always has been & will be"³² with self-reflection on the medium chosen to embody his thoughts and feelings.

¹ Station 1 is mentioned in Mark 15: 1–15; Station 2 in John 19: 13–17; Station 4 in John 19: 25–26; Station 5 in Mark 15: 21; Station 8 in Luke 23: 27–31; Station 10 in John 19: 23–24; Station 11 in Luke 23: 33; Station 12 in Matthew 27: 50; Station 13 in John 19: 33–34, 38; Station 14 in Mark 15:46–47; Stations 3, 6, 7, 9 are not mentioned in any of the Gospels.

² See William Wey, *The Itineraries of William Wey*, ed. Francis Davey (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010). Wey visited Jerusalem in 1458 and 1462.

³ An indulgence, in Roman Catholic theology, is the full or partial remission of punishment for sins, as granted by the Church after the sinner has confessed and received absolution; it generally involves certain actions by the recipient, most often the reciting of prayers.

⁴ Colin McCahon to Charles Brasch, 26 June 1949, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: There is Only One Direction, Vol. 1 1919–1959* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2019), 133. The reference to Auckland was to an exhibition which took place later in 1949 (August/September), immediately following one in Wellington at the gallery of Helen Hitchings (July/August); in both places McCahon exhibited jointly with Toss Woollaston.

⁵ See Simpson, *There is Only One Direction*, 37, 86–90.

⁶ Bill Pearson, "Two Personal Memories of James K. Baxter," *Islands* 3 (Autumn 1973): 3.

⁷ See Peter Simpson, *Bloomsbury South: The Arts in Christchurch 1933–53* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016), 235–36.

⁸ For a useful summary of facts and legends, see: A. Dégert, "St. Veronica," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), available at New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15362a.htm>

⁹ James K. Baxter, "To Colin McCahon," quoted in Simpson, *Bloomsbury South*, 244. Baxter's poem was written in response to McCahon's gift of a painting, *There is Only One Direction* (1952), a portrait of Jesus and Mary, to the Baxters.

¹⁰ McCahon to O'Reilly, 1 March 1949, quoted in Simpson, *There is Only One Direction*, 131.

¹¹ Ron O'Reilly, notes on exhibition at Helen Hitchings Gallery, 1949, O'Reilly Papers, quoted with the kind permission of the O'Reilly estate.

¹² Colin McCahon, *Fifteen Drawings for Charles Brasch, 1951–52*, black ink on brown paper, Hocken Collections, 1952.

¹³ James Hackshaw (1926–1999), architect; the Remuera chapel was the first of many buildings designed by Hackshaw (mainly schools and churches plus some private houses) for which McCahon provided glass windows.

¹⁴ See William McCahon, "A Letter Home," in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002), 29–39, and in other writings by William McCahon.

-
- ¹⁵ Colin McCahon in *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition* (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972), 27.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: Is This the Promised Land? Vol. 2 1960–1987* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020), 328.
- ¹⁷ McCahon to Brasch, 24 December 1966, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 82.
- ¹⁸ McCahon to Peter McLeavey, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 161, 202.
- ¹⁹ McCahon to O'Reilly, 8 May 1973, 30 March 1973, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 202.
- ²⁰ One of these drawings is in Auckland Art Gallery.
- ²¹ An important source for McCahon of this and other Māori myths, proverbs and waiata was Matire Kereama, *The Tail of the Fish: Māori Memories of the Far North* (Auckland: Oswald Sealy, 1968).
- ²² McCahon to Patricia France, 13 August 1973, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 206.
- ²³ McCahon to O'Reilly, 8 October 1973, quoted with the kind permission of the O'Reilly estate and the McCahon family.
- ²⁴ McCahon to O'Reilly, 3 October 1973, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 289.
- ²⁵ McCahon to O'Reilly, 14 October 1977, quoted with the kind permission of the O'Reilly estate and the McCahon family.
- ²⁶ See Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 263.
- ²⁷ McCahon to O'Reilly, 22 March 1977, quoted with the kind permission of the O'Reilly estate and the McCahon family.
- ²⁸ McCahon to O'Reilly, 3 October 1977, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 289.
- ²⁹ Dr Walter Auburn (1906–1979) was a medical doctor and Jewish émigré who was an honorary curator of prints and drawings at Auckland Art Gallery. He bequeathed 1500 historical prints to the gallery. See <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/archives/19597>
- ³⁰ Justin Paton, in *Beloved: Works from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery* (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2009), 205.
- ³¹ Paton, *Beloved*, 293.
- ³² McCahon to O'Reilly, 27 September 1974, quoted in Simpson, *Is This the Promised Land*, 13.