*Colin McCahon: There is Only One Direction Vol. 1 1919 - 1959*
*Colin McCahon: Is This the Promised Land, Vol. 2. 1960 - 1987*
By Peter Simpson. Auckland University Press, 2019/2020.
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Reviewed by Kirsty Baker

Colin McCahon remains an inescapable figure in the arts discourse of Aotearoa New Zealand. His long-standing reputation as our greatest painter, though frequently disputed, continues to cast its shadow over the landscape of both art writing and display. Frequently depicted as both a misunderstood genius and our most accomplished artist, McCahon occupies the central position within an increasingly tenuous 'grand narrative' of New Zealand art history. This narrative - overwhelmingly masculine and structured around a Pākehā perception of nationhood - remains stubbornly persistent, despite significant criticism of its exclusions and biases. As such, Simpson's mammoth two-volume monographic work, the result of research spanning five decades, enters a discursive terrain that is both well-trodden and contentious.

Published in 2019 to coincide with the centennial year of McCahon's birth, *There is Only One Direction* and its companion volume *Is This the Promised Land?* published in 2020, are presented as the definitive resource on the artist. The longevity of Simpson's engagement with McCahon's practice, and the exactitude of his research, have resulted in a publication that - within the parameters of a Pākehā art history - fulfills this aim. Each volume is well-presented and lavishly illustrated with an extensive collection of high quality colour plates at the end of each chapter, allowing the reader to easily find reproductions of the key works discussed. Each chapter's title page is paired with a full page photograph of McCahon, the first depicting him as a teenager and the last as a grandfather, two years prior to his death. Further images appear in-text throughout the books: reproductions of paintings, sketches and notes from McCahon's notebooks, letters written in his familiar script, exhibition catalogues and photographs of significant landscapes.

The sheer volume of material covered by Simpson, and the granular level of detail by which it has been recounted, has resulted in a necessary division into two volumes. By taking a chronological approach to the material as a whole, and breaking the narrative after McCahon's time in Titirangi, the division of the text is handled effectively. Though the length of time covered in each volume differs quite significantly, each feels equally weighted due to the similar spans of McCahon's working life that they cover - and it is McCahon's working life that takes centre-stage here.

Simpson's chronology is broken first into geographic chapters, which are reduced further still by a prodigious use of subheadings. While some of these, particularly in the early stages of volume one, relate to events in McCahon's life ('Māpua, Dunedin, marriage, 1942' p56) the majority of subheadings refer directly to artworks, whether individual paintings or series' of works. Simpson's narrative is constructed around McCahon's paintings, their development pushing his chronology forwards, with biographical detail emerging predominantly to elucidate the formal and thematic discussions. Extensive description of individual works is consistent throughout each volume, ensuring that the entirety of McCahon's ouevre is considered in significant detail. Simpson links familiar subjects and themes, elaborating upon their development and demonstrating a thorough knowledge and obvious admiration for his subject.Often the development of a painting is recounted in exacting detail, the thought processes behind its creation forensically pieced together through consultation with McCahon's correspondence.

Occasionally this minutiae comes close to being overwhelming. However, Simpson's continual return to central thematic strands serves well to broaden the focus, while also tracing unifying through-lines in the lengthy chronology. We return repeatedly to the recurrence of key imagery in McCahon's work, to the critical reception of his painting, his ambivalent relationship to religion, and the seriousness with which he took his vocation.

Simpson skillfully fleshes out the context in which McCahon was working, drawing a picture of the cultural landscape of which he was a part. Simpson quotes a recurring list of familiar names at length: James K. Baxter, Charles Brasch, John Caselberg and Toss Woolaston, for instance, are all heavily represented in the index. The voices of these 'heavy-weights' are used to illuminate the intellectual environment in which McCahon painted, and to shed light on the critical reception that greeted his work at the time it was made. It is never in doubt that Simpson is a firm believer in McCahon's greatness. The artist that emerges through these pages is one of single-minded dedication to his craft, his paintings referred to on at least one occasion as masterpieces. In the preface to *Is This the Promised Land?* Simpson briefly recaps the ground covered in the first volume, charting the 'development' and 'evolution' of McCahon's painting practice to one that reached 'full maturity'. The books painstakingly construct the development of this career, and in doing so, reiterate McCahon's central position within a singular narrative of New Zealand's art history.

In the first volume, Simpson argues that McCahon had a more ambivalent relationship to the cultural nationalism which characterised much of the country's dominant arts discourse in the twentieth century, than is generally accepted. While Simpson certainly argues his case effectively, his McCahon remains firmly situated within that dominant milieu. It becomes increasingly evident as we progress through each volume that this narrative is one dominated by Pākehā men. Simpson may complicate McCahon's relationship with the dominant cultural nationalism in which he was working, but *There is Only One Direction* and *Is This the Promised Land?* leave its cultural and gendered power dynamics intact.

The manner in which McCahon's wife, Anne McCahon (neé Hamblett), has been included as a presence throughout the book is a useful indicator here, frequently cast in the role of supporter, cheerleader and caregiver. A talented painter in her own right, Anne McCahon's artistic career was ultimately sacrificed in pursuit of her husband's 'genius'. Though Simpson acknowledges the fact that she was an artist, this is rendered incidental. For instance, in volume one, he writes 'By the time the McCahons moved to 9 Barbour Street, Anne seems to have completely given up painting though she continued to draw…' (135) The phrasing here indicates an inexplicable and passive shift, rendering invisible the structural inequities that spelt the end of her artistic career, along with those of numerous other women. In volume two Simpson notes that 'McCahon constructed a large new studio at Muriwai on the property purchased with a legacy of his wife Anne.' (144) Again, there is an opportunity here to interrogate the gendered imbalance which sees the wife's money facilitate the career of the husband. It is undeniable that societal expectations regarding gender played a significant role in the lack of opportunities for Anne McCahon's development as an artist. While this is not a book about her, this same network of expectations and obligations regarding normative gender roles also played a significant part in the elevation of McCahon's status. In a cultural landscape drawn through a Pākehā lens, in which women occupy a secondary position, the deification of a Pākehā man above all others becomes inevitable.

The relative absence of Māori artists, writers and cultural figures in Simpson's account of McCahon's career is also reflective of a wider set of cultural exclusions at play in the construction of New Zealand's art history. The European foundations of the discipline have resulted in a largely mono-cultural (Pākehā) perception of the country's arts landscape, that has only recently begun to be challenged. Significant mention of te ao Māori is not made by Simpson until the second volume, driven by McCahon's burgeoning interest in Māori themes and imagery. This is, of course, a consequence of Simpson's approach: by structuring the book around a chronology of McCahon's paintings, they dictate the book's content. However, the persistent privileging of McCahon within a canon of New Zealand art has consistently marginalised the contributions of numerous other artists. Where Simpson does mention other artists, they are predominantly - with the exception of Ralph Hotere - those Pākehā men who were McCahon's peers.

During a discussion of McCahon's usage of koru imagery in volume two - in which the term cultural appropriation is conspicuous in its absence - the cultural context in which both McCahon and Simpson are engaged is made clear. Simpson writes: 'McCahon was not alone in exploring Māori design motifs in the mid-1960s,' (80) naming Theo Schoon and Gordon Walters as artists who shared similar concerns. Both Schoon and Walters have been the focus of considerable critique from Māori scholars and artists in recent decades, due to the appropriation of Māori imagery in their work. While these critiques could perhaps be considered too recent to be effectively included within Simpson's chronology, there are ways in which the mono-cultural picture of the arts scene could be challenged while leaving that chronology intact. Numerous Māori artists such as Fred Graham, Mere Harrison, Katerina Mataira, Paratene Matchitt, Elizabeth Mountain, Selwyn Muru, Buck Nin, Pauline Yearbury and Arnold Wilson - among others - were working contemporaneously with McCahon, Schoon and Walters, and warrant inclusion here. An acknowledgement of the innovative work being produced by these artists to forge a distinctly Māori form of Modernism would make evident the complex network of cultural and artistic exchange at play in the 1960s, of which McCahon was but a part. European and Pākehā artists were not the only ones deploying Māori 'motifs' – though perhaps they were the only ones for whom they could be considered simply 'motifs' or 'imagery'.

To echo an observation made by Shannon Te Ao, writing for *The Spinoff* in 2019, McCahon's deification is one which has left a 'problematic legacy'. It is a legacy created and reiterated through the prolific discourse that has coalesced around McCahon and his work. As Simpson points out in his epilogue, McCahon's work has been exhibited frequently, collected widely by public institutions and frequently fetches high prices at auction, he has been the subject of numerous catalogue essays, journal articles, book chapters and books: in short Simpson argues that 'McCahon's position as New Zealand's greatest twentieth-century artist is unassailed…' (359) The expansive McCahon discourse is presented as evidence in support of his status as our greatest artist. It is, in fact, this very proliferation of literature that has created this legacy, each publication or exhibition acting as an assertion of his centrality, repeatedly re-inscribing the power of his position. Through extensive research, unparalleled access to McCahon's correspondence and decades of consideration, Simpson has produced a publication that will become a key text on the artist. Despite the exactitude of his research and his insightful engagements with McCahon's work, this dual volume ultimately reiterates a narrow set of cultural and gendered parameters which have long shaped the telling of this country's art history. How useful is the reiteration of his narrative - however thoroughly and engagingly executed - as a contemporary reflection of Aotearoa New Zealand's art history? Is McCahon's story still one that requires re-telling, at the expense of so many others?