

INTRODUCTION

COLIN McCAHON: LIFE AND AFTERLIFE

This special issue has its origins in a symposium held at Monash University in February 2020 in honour of the centenary of the birth of Colin McCahon (1919–1987). Six of its nine articles are revised versions of papers from the symposium. Three others, by Leonard Bell, Anna Parlane and Matariki Williams, are invited contributions.

The centenary, which concluded in August, has re-energised discussion of McCahon’s art and its legacy: two books have been published, a number of exhibitions held, and McCahon House in Auckland has put out a short biography of McCahon and posted more than sixty short essays on its website by admirers of his work.¹ Like all of these, the symposium sought to foster new perspectives on McCahon’s painting and to reaffirm its significance for New Zealand culture. It differed from them, however, in calling for critical as well as celebratory engagements with these topics. The issue’s contributions reflect these three ambitions. Ranged beneath the heading “Life and Afterlife,” they shed new light on the development of McCahon’s art during his lifetime, consider its reception in the decades since and offer innovative readings of his works in which questions of life and afterlife are at stake.

One such reading, by Peter Simpson, concerns the paintings McCahon devoted to St. Veronica. Veronica’s veil or cloth is said to have captured a perfect likeness of Christ’s face when she wiped his brow while he was on his way to his Crucifixion. It thus preserved his “true image” (*vera icon*) after his death—a lifelike visage of the Saviour that remained when he had passed into his afterlife. Most of McCahon’s Veronica paintings are far from lifelike. He did, however, hope they would communicate his spiritual concerns as truthfully and vividly as possible. Perhaps this is why Veronica was a subject he returned to repeatedly over a period of thirty years.

Laurence Simmons considers another of McCahon’s religious subjects: the Holy Spirit. How, Simmons asks, does an artist paint the unrepresentable, and thus instil divine life in the dead realm of pigment? In responding to this question, he compares McCahon’s *Visible Mysteries* series of the 1960s to the work of Renaissance painter Jacopo Pontormo. The two artists are not historically connected, but both sought to make present within the space of painting a subject that is normally absent from the secular realm.

Turning from religion to the land, Jane McCabe considers McCahon’s responses to the Taieri Plain on the outskirts of his home town of Dunedin. McCabe traces the evolution of those responses, in both his writing and his art, from 1936 to 1966, paying particular attention to his attitudes to land and settlement. She considers these in light of her recent research on rural land inheritance in the area.

Four of the six remaining articles consider the reception of McCahon’s work and reassess aspects of its legacy:

Leonard Bell examines McCahon’s mythologisation as New Zealand’s greatest painter. He asks if claims about McCahon’s originality have been exaggerated and questions his reliability as a narrator of his own biography.

The problems of biography are also foregrounded by Martin Edmond in his Reflections essay. Edmond recalls the challenges he faced when he was asked to write McCahon's biography for McCahon House. He describes the conflicting memories McCahon's children have of their father, highlights unsubstantiated claims McCahon made about his ancestry and points to some of the challenges for any aspiring McCahon biographer.

Anna Parlane looks at efforts by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki to burnish McCahon's reputation in the wake of his death. Revisiting the exhibition *after McCahon*, held at the Gallery in 1989, Parlane examines the institution's reluctance to acknowledge the desire of younger artists to escape from McCahon's shadow. Many of these artists were wary of the market forces that had also helped to elevate his standing in the 1980s.

McCahon's engagements with te reo and te ao Māori have been the subject of much discussion since the 1970s, much of it critical. Matariki Williams lends her own voice to this sceptical chorus. She expresses her misgivings concerning McCahon's engagement with Māori culture and argues that Māori commentary on his work has been downplayed or dismissed by Pākehā historians.

The two final contributions offer more optimistic appraisals of McCahon's legacy:

Rex Butler and Laurence Simmons take up McCahon's so-called Last Paintings, noting in particular that the empty black section in the painting understood to be McCahon's very last, *I considered all the acts of oppression* (1981), opens the work up to the future and to the voice of his interpreter.

Several decades after his death, McCahon's work has demonstrated its appeal to a diverse audience. Along these lines, Luke Smythe argues that his impure approach to abstract painting helps explain this popularity. This at once makes his paintings more accessible than they would be were they purely abstract and allows viewers to find their own meanings in his art.

Now, one hundred and one years since his birth, McCahon's work continues to inspire responses of all kinds. In some ways, this was even what McCahon hoped for and sought to arrange for himself. The possibility of an afterlife was something that concerned him throughout his life, both as someone concerned with Christianity and as an artist. Indeed, that afterlife of Christ he painted so often in his career would even be his own, as he well knew. And we for our part, looking at and speaking about his work, would be his earthly Apostles spreading the Word after he has gone.

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Luke Smythe and Rex Butler, coeditors of this special issue.

¹ For the recently published books on McCahon, see Justin Paton, *McCahon Country* (Auckland: Penguin New Zealand, 2019); Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: There is Only One Direction, Vol. 1 1919–1959* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2019), and *Colin McCahon: Is This the Promised Land?, Vol. 2 1960–1987* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020). For the recent exhibitions, see *A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki 10 August 2019–27 March 2020; *Colin McCahon: Letters and Numbers*, National Gallery of Victoria, 14 November 2019–1 April 2020; *A Land of Granite: McCahon and Otago*, 7 March 2020–18 October 2020, Dunedin Public Art Gallery; and *Colin McCahon: A Constant Flow of Light*, Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, 15 August 2020–6 March 2021. See also Martin Edmond, *Endless Yet Never* (Auckland: McCahon House, 2020) and the McCahon House website: <https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/>.