

*...name!*  
*...name!*  
I HAVE  
GLORIFIED  
IT AND I WILL  
GLORIFY IT  
AGAIN

Now my soul  
is in turmoil  
and what have  
I to say?  
Father, save  
me from this  
hour.  
No, it was for this  
that I came to

The light  
is among you  
all, but not  
for long. So  
in your way  
while you  
have the light,  
so that darkness  
may not over-  
take you. He  
who journeys  
in the dark  
does not know

The crowd standing  
by, said it was  
thunder, while  
others said, 'An  
angel has spoken  
to him.' Jesus  
replied, 'This  
voice spoke for  
your sake,  
not mine.'

the light  
is among you

While you have  
the light, trust  
in the light,  
that you may  
become men of  
light.



# COLIN McCAHON EDUCATION RESOURCE



This education resource has been designed to encourage enquiry and discussion within the exhibition. For further online information visit: [nga.gov.au/McCahon](http://nga.gov.au/McCahon)

Unless otherwise stated, all works of art reproduced here are in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

(left)  
Colin McCahon, *Titirangi*, c. 1958  
Courtesy of McCahon family archive

(cover image)  
*Victory over death 2* 1970  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas  
207.5 x 597.7 cm  
Gift of the New Zealand Government 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

## Biography

Colin McCahon was born in 1919 at Timaru, a small township on the South Island of New Zealand. He grew up in Dunedin also in the South Island, but later moved to Auckland in the North Island. McCahon attended the Dunedin Art School during the 1930s and from an early age was convinced he would become an artist.

The dramatic New Zealand landscape was a source of ongoing fascination for McCahon and even when the subject matter was religious or script based, the landscape often appeared as a moody presence. *Crucifixion: the apple branch* 1950 is a typical painting from this early period as it incorporates the landscape with iconic Christian imagery, text and family references.

In 1958 McCahon visited America where he was inspired by the scale and intensity of abstract art. He was also interested in the Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings he saw there.

His work was paradoxically both intensely private and boldly public. Although McCahon stated that his work was autobiographical, the

underlying purpose was not to reveal his own doubts and frailties, but to offer a wider humanitarian interpretation and to raise questions and doubts in the mind of the viewer.

In 1960 McCahon moved the family to Auckland. During this decade he joined the teaching staff at the University of Auckland School of Fine Arts while continuing to pursue his interest in landscape images, numerals, Stations of the Cross and other religious references. In the late 1960s McCahon explored the dual forces of death and resurrection in works that focused on the story of Lazarus. An intense period of creativity followed, culminating in the massive paintings of the early 1970s of which *Victory over death 2* is perhaps the best known. The New Zealand Government donated the work to the Australian Government in 1978.

McCahon retired from teaching to become a full-time painter in 1970, enabling him to concentrate on his painting and to exhibit widely in New Zealand and overseas. In 1984 McCahon gained further recognition in Australia with a number of his paintings being exhibited at the Fifth Biennale of Sydney. Colin McCahon died in 1987.



*Crucifixion: the apple branch* 1950  
Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand  
oil on canvas 89.0 x 117.0 cm  
Purchased with funds from the Sir Otto  
and Lady Margaret Frankel Bequest 2004  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research  
and Publication Trust

Painted after a period of creating images of the New Zealand landscape, this painting marks a turning point in McCahon's work. It combines personal images with religious iconography and anticipates later symbolic paintings in which biblical texts are given a subjective overtone.

On the left, his self-portrait looks towards the crucifixion set against a Canterbury landscape. On the right, his wife Anne Hamblett stands under an apple tree with their son William. Behind her are the hills of Nelson. This division reflects the time McCahon had to spend away from his family due to financial difficulties. The painting also refers to two biblical time frames – the Old and the New testaments; the former represented by the apple tree symbolising temptation, the latter by the crucifixion and the skulls at the base of the cross. The letters INRI refer to the initials for the Latin title that Pontius Pilate had written over the head of Jesus Christ on the cross. Translated, they state 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'.

- Look for the repetition of curves in this painting. What other elements of the design are repeated?
- What is McCahon suggesting by placing himself in the same space and time as the crucifixion of Christ?

This work was one of the last paintings McCahon created. Feelings of optimism and hope had faded and he was at a low ebb physically and psychologically. Alcohol dominated his life and he was beset by negative feelings about the state of world politics, consumerism, and environmental degradation. He could no longer make sense of the world. The text, written obsessively like words on a blackboard, was chosen from Ecclesiastes and captures his hopelessness.

'God has set the one alongside the other in such a way that no one can find out what is to happen next; in my empty existence I have seen it all from a righteous man perishing in his righteousness to a wicked man growing old in his wickedness. Do not be over-righteous and do not be over-wise. Why make yourself a laughing stock?'

- Take time to read this painting. What sorts of images are conjured up by the words?
- What is McCahon revealing about himself by the choice of text?
- As this work resembles a blackboard, what might McCahon be saying about the role of words in his art?

*I applied my mind ...* 1982 Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas 195.0 x 180.5 cm On loan from a private collection, Aotearoa New Zealand Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust



Father, glorify your name.

John 8:43

**I HAVE  
GLORIFIED  
IT AND I WILL  
GLORIFY IT  
AGAIN.**

Now my soul  
is in turmoil  
and what have  
I to say?

Father, save  
me from this  
hour.

No, it was for this  
that I came to  
this hour.

The light  
is among you  
still, but not  
for long. So  
on your way  
while you  
have the light,  
so that darkness  
may not over-  
take you. He  
who journeys  
in the dark  
does not know  
where he is  
going.

The crowd shouting  
by, said it was  
thunder, while  
others said, "An  
angel has spoken  
to him." Jews  
replied, "This  
voice spoke for  
your sake,  
not mine!"

the light  
is among you

While you have  
the light, trust  
in the light,  
that you may  
become men of  
light.

AM



*Victory over death 2* 1970  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
synthetic polymer paint on unstretched canvas  
207.5 x 597.7 cm  
Gift of the New Zealand Government 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

The words 'I Am' are from Exodus (3:4). 'Then Moses said to God. 'If I go to the Israelites and tell them that the God of their forefathers has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, what shall I say?' God answered. 'I AM, that is who I am. Tell them I AM has sent you to them.'

I AM refers to the presence of God. However there is an ambiguous, dark and doubting 'AM' barely visible before the blinding light of the 'I'. The painting's major text therefore reads 'AM ... I AM'. Although the doubt is less dominant it is still perceived with time. Is he questioning the existence of God, his own faith or creating a sense of doubt in the mind of the viewer?

- What could be the symbolic meaning of black, grey and white in this painting?
- Who do you think McCahon is addressing with his question 'AM I AM'?

Let us then  
stop discussing  
the rudiments of  
Christianity. We  
ought not to be  
arguing over again  
the foundations of  
faith in God and of  
repentance from the  
deadness of our former  
ways: by instruction  
about cleansing rites and  
the laying-on of hands,  
about the resurrection of  
the dead and eternal  
judgement.

Instead let us  
advance towards  
maturity; and so we  
shall, if God permits.

Matthew 23  
The Pharisees and the Scribes

SHALL  
WE  
GATHER  
AT THE  
RIVER

A NEW SERIES  
ON WALLPAPER  
BY  
Colin  
McCahon

This logo can  
be an ornament!

McCahon  
1969

ECCE  
AGNUS  
DEI

ECCE QUI  
TOLLIT  
PECCATA MUNDI

Behold the Lamb of  
GOD. behold  
HIM WHO  
takes away the  
sins of the  
world.

Created a year before *Victory over death 2*, these three scroll paintings were part of a series of seventy-five works that McCahon named 'writing paintings and drawings'. The passages were drawn from the New English Bible and question the relationship of text with organised religion and similarly the relationship between words and faith. McCahon accentuates his own emotional involvement by the use of his own cursive handwriting and the emphasis he places on certain words by using capitals, size and depth of colour. The delicate washes created by the water-based crayons add another level of interpretation as they give the words a tentative, open-ended appearance.

- Read these texts to yourself, emphasising the darker words in capital letters. Think about the rhythm of written and spoken words.
- Why do you think McCahon is quoting in Latin?

(far left)  
*Let us then stop discussing the rudiments of Christianity* 1969  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
water-based crayon and wash  
on paper 157.2 x 55.2 cm sheet  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon  
Research and Publication Trust

(middle)  
*Shall we gather at the river* 1969  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
water-based crayon and wash  
on paper 155.5 x 55.0 cm  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon  
Research and Publication Trust

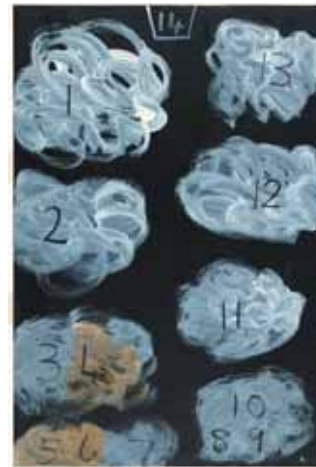
(right)  
*Ecce Agnus Dei* 1969  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
water-based crayon and wash  
on paper 154.4 x 55.2 cm  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon  
Research and Publication Trust

The numbers set within the clouds represent the fourteen Stations of the Cross – Christ's journey from condemnation through to his crucifixion and final burial. While the numbers refer to the divine, the clouds belong to the secular world and in fact were inspired by the view from the Muriwai cliff edge above Maori Bay in New Zealand. Clouds, the most uncontrollable natural phenomena, are arranged here in sequential order overlaid with Christian symbols. Maybe McCahon is stating that through artistic imagination the spiritual and the real world can become one.

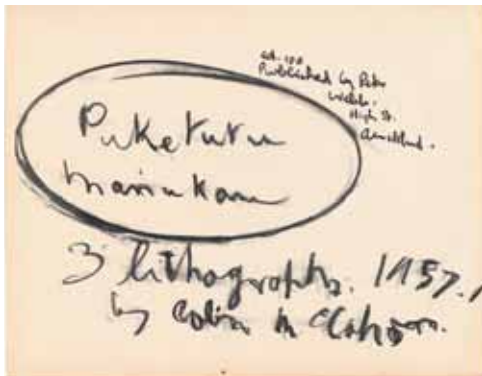
- Compare these two paintings. What are the similarities and differences?
- Why has McCahon juxtaposed clouds in a regular pattern with the fourteen Stations of the Cross?
- What is he saying about the relationship between nature and the spirituality of mankind?



*Clouds 1* 1975  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
synthetic polymer paint on paper  
Purchased 1978  
109.4 x 72.8 cm sheet  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research  
and Publication Trust



*Clouds 2* 1975  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
synthetic polymer paint on paper  
Purchased 1978  
109.4 x 72.8 cm sheet  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research  
and Publication Trust



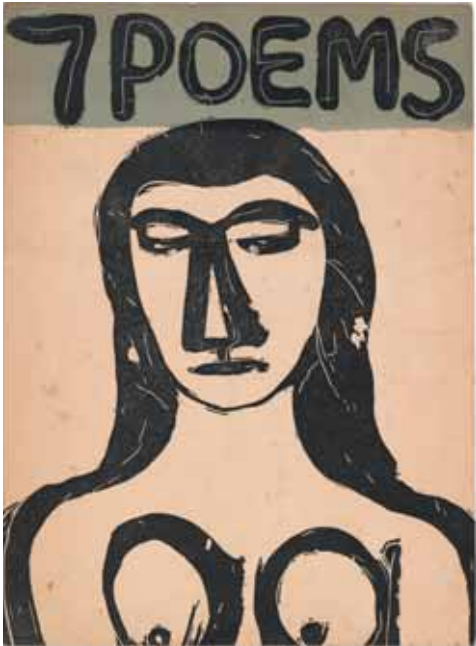
Title page for *Puketutu Manukau*  
lithograph on paper  
image 18.6 x 26.2 cm  
sheet 21.6 x 26.8 cm  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust



*Puketutu Manukau 2* from *Puketutu Manukau*  
colour lithograph on paper  
printed image 21.2 x 25.5 cm  
sheet 21.6 x 26.8 cm  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust



*Puketutu Manukau 3* from *Puketutu Manukau*  
lithograph on paper  
printed image 19.2 x 26.0 cm  
sheet 21.6 x 26.8 cm  
Purchased 1978  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust



Title page for *7 poems*  
by John Caselberg 1952  
Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand  
colour linocut; letterpress on paper  
book (closed) 24.6 x 18.0 cm  
book (open) 24.6 x 36.0 cm  
Purchased 2005  
Courtesy of the Colin McCahon  
Research and Publication Trust

McCahon turned to printmaking for financial reasons during the 1950s. The striking two-colour linocut of a young woman was created as a cover design for a self-published broadsheet written by two poets. McCahon's renowned later text/image paintings owe their existence to these early prints.

The other prints in this exhibition demonstrate McCahon's involvement with lithography, a technique that relies on the fact that grease and water do not mix. With no cutting required, a quick, graphic, gestural image can be achieved.

In the three *Puketutu Manukau* lithographs, McCahon exhibits his preoccupation with the landscape and weather of New Zealand. The prints, while demonstrating his interest in a cubist fractured surface, also indicate a sequential depiction of a storm.

- Look at the series of prints *Puketutu Manukau 1–3*
- How does McCahon build up an image of a storm in a New Zealand landscape?

## Further reading

- Marja Bloem and Martin Browne (eds.), *Colin McCahon: A question of faith*, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum and Nelson, New Zealand, Craig Potton Publishing, 2003
- Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, Wellington: Reed Publishing, second revised edition 1993
- Hart, D. ,'Colin McCahon: Crucifixion the apple branch', *artonview*, Issue No. 40, Summer, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2004, pp.26–27

## Internet resources

- [nga.gov.au/McCahon](http://nga.gov.au/McCahon)
- [mccahon.co.nz](http://mccahon.co.nz)
- [ngv.vic.gov.au/McCahon](http://ngv.vic.gov.au/McCahon)

## Itinerary

### Australian tour

Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery @ Inveresk, Launceston Tas,  
16 June – 2 September 2007

Dell Gallery @QCA, Brisbane QLD,  
19 September – 28 October 2007

### New Zealand Tour

Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, Christchurch New Zealand,  
8 March - 15 June 2008

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin New Zealand,  
5 July - 14 September 2008

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