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Zoe Alderton

Cliffs as Crosses

The Problematic Symbology of Colin McCahon

This paper examines the schism between intended message and reception in the case of New Zealand artist Colin McCahon (1919–1987). McCahon was heavily influenced by Christianity, for him linked inextricably to a message of ecological conservation, and he considered painting to be a prophetic task. As such, McCahon hoped to bring about the religious and behavioural transformation of his audience. McCahon's Necessary Protection artworks use Christian symbols as a means of communicating the importance of faith as well as his fear of environmental degradation and the necessity of loving one's homeland. However, McCahon's complex symbolic lexicon has often proven to be too esoteric to have the intended affect on its intended audience.

Colin McCahon's Muriwai artworks invoke the distinct local landscape as both a fragile and a protective force. These paintings present the land as a source of nourishment that must be preserved, or at least memorialised,

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before it is lost forever. McCahon uses the Muriwai cliffs, on the rugged coast of New Zealand's North Island, as a literal and symbolic connection between God and earth, as symbolised in the Tau cross. The cross, a recurrent motif in McCahon's oeuvre, acts as a physical representation of Muriwai, a sign of transcendence, a reference to prophecy, and a bridge between the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible.[1] The dominant meaning of this symbol is a gate through which sacred power and understanding may travel as a balm for religious or spiritual darkness. Within McCahon's work, the realm of Muriwai is constructed as a lesson for the human soul. Depicted variously as a nestling, a cross, or an airplane, this soul is developed in the nest of Necessary Protection and must take a leap of faith in order to mature.[2]

McCahon's religiosity was world-affirming and understood environmentalism as nothing less than a prophetic duty; to preserve the fragile ecosystem of Muriwai was to preserve both the human connection to God and a language for understanding the journey of faith. As such, the complex Necessary Protection artworks expose the connection between McCahon's syncretic Christian theology and his concern for the ecology of Muriwai. McCahon's move from abstraction to realism and his continually evolving symbolic lexicon are evidence of his pedagogical drive. If McCahon's artworks are intended as lessons for his audience, it is revealing and even necessary to observe the reactions of his audience to these lessons. McCahon's landscape paintings are generally popular and well received, both in his native New Zealand and internationally. Despite this, the complexity and obscurity of the symbolic lexicon he employs in Necessary Protection clearly present an at times insurmountable challenge in terms of audience engagement with McCahon's intended lessons. Considering the high standards of reception that McCahon set for himself, superficial reactions to his imagery failed to satisfy his prophetic aims. When viewed in light of the critical framework of Erwin Panofsky,[3] McCahon's obscure motifs can be understood as a problematic communication device and the reason for an obvious lack of audience response and engagement with this series and its religious implications.

[1] This motif does, however, predate the Necessary Protection series and is evident as far back as *On Building Bridges* (1952).

[2] The author and editors acknowledge with gratitude the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust for permission to reproduce the works discussed here. We thank also Carole Cusack for her generosity in covering the copyright fee for reproduction of these works.

[3] Primarily Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

Introducing the Symbols of Necessary Protection

An important religious application of the New Zealand landscape can be found in McCahon's Necessary Protection series of the early 1970s. These artworks combine McCahon's Christian faith with the spiritual power he garnered from the land. Underpinning this spiritual dimension, McCahon sees the native environment of New Zealand as exceptionally protective. He explains:

> Up north the manuka hangs fiercely to the land form. It is a protective skin, it protects the land it needs and the land gives it life and a season of red and pink and white flowering. Take the manuka and the land is lost. This situation is the one I refer to in all the paintings and drawings that belong to the family I call *Necessary Protection*.[4]

McCahon presents the land as something fragile and temporal. His environmentalist spirituality emerges in a warning that we may lose this protection through improper treatment of the land. As such, McCahon sources his power from the local environment, naming an indigenous shrub as the totem of protection.[5]

McCahon came to appreciate pre-colonial culture in the late 1950s when his daughter Victoria married a Māori man. As can be seen in his approach to Necessary Protection, McCahon began to appreciate the role of land in the Māori belief system, realising that other cultural groups embraced their native soil.[6] He saw it as an alternative to material, secular Western society.[7] McCahon felt that "we [Pākehā] have all been on our own too long. We need a change in this direction."[8] With this new mindset, McCahon made an attempt to withdraw from Western culture, which he associated with de-

[4] Colin McCahon, "Necessary Protection," in "Artists and the Environment," *Art New Zealand*, no. 7 (August/September/October 1977): 43.

[5] McCahon's references to the manuka plant go as far back as his iconic *Northland Panels* (1958).

[6] William McCahon, "Colin McCahon: A Simple View," in *Three Paintings by Colin McCahon*, ed. Martin Browne (Sydney: Martin Browne Fine Art, 1998), 7.

[7] Peter Simpson, *Candles in a Dark Room: James K. Baxter and Colin McCahon* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 1995), 5.

[8] Colin McCahon, speaking in 1979, cited in Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist* (1984; Auckland: Reed, 1993). Pākehā is a local idiom used to refer to New Zealanders of European descent.

struction,[9] and moved towards Māori ideas that he considered more peaceful and harmonious.[10] In keeping with this mindset, McCahon describes artworks based on "what we have got now and will never have again" as "the subject of my painting for a long time." He wished to achieve this before the sky turned to soot and the sea became "a slowly heaving rubbish tip."[11]

Unpacking the concept of "Necessary Protection" requires, among other things, an understanding of the geography of Muriwai. McCahon's The View From the Top of the Cliff series (1971) is a good introductory point to depictions of this region, and exemplifies the depth of his environmentalism. McCahon states that "the view from the top of the cliff" is a depiction of Muriwai *and* Ahipara, evidencing the geographical interchangeability of these sites. The piece of land this series is based upon was up for sale at the time, but McCahon and his wife were unable to purchase it due to a lack of funds. He lamented, "buying so often has to do with destruction and exploitation." Here we see the word of commerce and mechanism paired with devastation and opposed to the gentle nourishment of the natural world.

The View From the Top of the Cliff no. 2 (Figure 1) shows a realistic ocean, filled with seaweed and rocks, bobbing under the luminous yellow sky of sunset. *The View From the Top of the Cliff* is presented from the same vantage point, further into the gloaming with the sky and the sea reflecting a deep crimson shade. This view, devoid of human alteration, was already partially imaginary; the Muriwai cliff that inspired these works was besieged by quarrying and sullied by rubbish on the beach below. In these artworks, the sky is filled with floating objects. These symbols can be read as birds, comets, or airplanes. Their multifarious meanings, converging into a representation of the human soul, will be examined shortly. The minute details of these artworks are for McCahon deeply meaningful. Thus, for example, the ab-

[9] His 1961 Gate series dealt with the fear of nuclear destruction and the greed felt towards these weapons. The pacifistic McCahon began to see Western culture as a dangerous and destructive force under the shadow of the Cold War. McCahon's first explicit use of Māori symbols dates back to 1965.

[10] Ian North, "In the Coil of Life's Hunger: James K. Baxter 1926–1972 Colin McCahon 1919–1987," *Artlink* 14, no. 4 (1994): 43. The inspiration Pākehā have taken from Māori art and culture has often been problematic, and is the subject of a good deal of critique. For an excellent analysis of this complicated discourse, see: Francis Pound, *The Space Between: Pākehā Use of Māori Motifs in Modernist New Zealand Art* (Auckland: Workshop Press, 1994).

[11] These comments, and those in the following paragraph, are from McCahon's statement in the catalogue of "an exhibition of landscape painting that paid homage to the land," entitled *Earth/Earth* (Auckland: Barry Lett Galleries, 1971, unpaginated).

Figure 1: Colin McCahon, *The View From the Top of the Cliff no. 2* (1971) http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000467

sence of foreground purposefully creates a sense of vertigo and implies the act of jumping in a very immediate sense. These details may be more readily appreciated if we approach McCahon's Muriwai and Northland artworks as a whole.

The Meaning of the Tau Cross

Another vital element of the Necessary Protection series is the Tau cross, a symbol repeatedly used in McCahon's body of work. This cross symbol originated with an event of McCahon's childhood where a parachutist died during a stunt on the hills of North Otago. A cross was erected as a memorial, and McCahon repeated both this symbol and the hills themselves in numerous paintings.[12] The Tau cross is an ancient symbol within Christianity, but is also known to other traditions. On a personal level, for McCahon it was a

[12] Colin McCahon, "Beginnings," *Landfall* 20, no. 4 (1966): 362.

symbol of life and death in Otago, making the cross as local and specific as it is international and interfaith.

McCahon describes the symbology of the Tau cross and associated letters as "very simple." He writes "The I of the sky, falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE. The T of sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament or Egyptian cross."[13] By employing the letters I and T, McCahon engages in religious symbology embroiled in the importance of light, land, and Christianity. His claims of simplicity are perhaps too optimistic. The symbology of the Tau cross is extraordinarily complex and has spawned a large critical discourse. Theorists have described the Tau cross as a symbol of transcendence, a symbol of the reciprocation between God and humankind, a symbol of prophecy, and a gate symbol. These varying interpretations are worthy of consideration, as they show both the multifarious nature of this symbol and the great deal of importance that scholars have assigned to it.[14]

In McCahon's vision, light appears to travel upwards and downwards. The cross is both the light of enlightenment from above and the earth-bound soul moving towards salvation. His Tau cross represents a specific relationship between the human and God.[15] McCahon himself insists that his Necessary Protection artworks are "about the Almighty looking after us."[16] Based on these readings, McCahon's Tau cross and his associated "I" may be understood as totems of a spiritual inter-relativity that bind together the personal with the universal on a number of levels. Unsurprisingly, McCahon indicates a specifically scriptural basis for his symbols. The artist writes that his Necessary Protection artworks are based on days and nights in the wilderness, a reference to the life of Jesus as Christ.[17]

[13] Colin McCahon, *McCahon's "Necessary Protection": The Catalogue of a Travelling Exhibition of Paintings from Colin McCahon's Various Series from 1971 to 1976*, with an introduction by Wystan Curnow (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1977), 12.

[14] Due to constraints of space, the scholarship alluded to here cannot be presented in its entirety.

[15] Christina Barton sees it as McCahon's sign of the "metaphysical union between heaven and earth, God and man" (*Language Matters* (Wellington: Adam Art Gallery, 2000), 4).

[16] Colin McCahon to Peter McLeavey, 13 July 1971 in Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 167.

[17] He also connects them to the actual painting known as *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness*. See *Colin McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, with an introduction by Ron O'Reilly (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972), 37. These artworks contain the letter I or the Tau cross seen in later works. Their name is most likely taken from the forty days and nights spend by Jesus in the wilderness, when he faced the temptations of Satan.

Reaching back to the Hebrew Bible, connections have been made between the Tau cross and the Israelites. According to some narratives, the Tau cross was placed on the doors of the Hebrew people on the night of the Passover.[18] The cross also evokes Moses as a figure of liberation and prophetic leadership. It has been read as the pillar of smoke and fire that guided the Jewish people through the wilderness in Exodus.[19] The Tau has also been described as the stave Moses hoisted before his journey into the wilderness.[20] Geoff Park, for example, states that McCahon's "ancient, Biblical and oft-wielded TAU Cross of *Necessary Protection* leads the people of the land out of the Egypt of colonial bondage, to the Promised Land."[21]

The Tau cross can, as is implied, be viewed as a gate or passageway. For example, Martin Edmond points out that the Tau cross is also known as the Egyptian cross, possibly due to its similarity to the Ankh—the Egyptian symbol of life. He mentions its use as a key to unlocking the gates of death, and as a Coptic Christian symbol of the afterlife. Edmond's research suggests that the Tau cross "may in itself represent a gate or an opening."[22] He sees it as both obstacle and portal like the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).[23] Although this analogy may seem incongruent, McCahon often presents symbols that simultaneously depict resistance and gateways.[24] Robert Leonard makes the comparable claim that the Tau cross symbol is "both a barrier and a way through."[25] For those who are hampered by faith the Tau cross, and by extension Christ, can be read as an impasse.

[18] This is based on Exod 12:22. Although the shape of the cross is not specified, it is sometimes assumed to be the Tau. See, for example, John M. Mulder, *Sealed in Christ: The Symbolism of the Seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1991), 14.

[19] Francis Pound, "Topographies," in *Flight Patterns*, ed. Cornelia H. Butler (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 133. Based on Bryce Nichol, "The Smoke and the Fire," unpublished essay.

[20] Geoff Park, "I Belong with the Wild Side of New Zealand—The Flowing Land in Colin McCahon," in *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 60.

[21] Geoff Park, "A Chart to Country," in *Urewera Mural* (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1999), n.p.

[22] *Zone of the Marvellous* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), 230.

[23] *Dark Night: Walking With McCahon* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011), 16.

[24] The obvious example is McCahon's Gate series, but artworks such as *On Building Bridges* have similar symbolic content.

[25] Robert Leonard, "Colin McCahon," in *TOI TOI TOI: Three Generations of Artists from New Zealand*, ed. Greg Burke et al. (Kassel: Museum Fridericianum, 1999), 29.

Figure 2: Colin McCahon, *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness: A Constant Flow of Light Falls on the Land* (1971)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm001192

Conversely, the cross and Christ are a means of transcending spiritual obstruction if one chooses to view them as a gateway rather than a blockade. Despite the confounding complexity of this vast range of meaning, all these possible definitions should be kept in mind when approaching a Tau-based artwork if the viewer wants to approach the work as McCahon had intended.

The small Days and Nights series (1971) can be viewed as a precursor to Necessary Protection. These three artworks are useful in decoding the perceived functions of the Tau cross based on their titles: *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing into a Dark Landscape*, *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing Through the Wall of Death*, and *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness: A Constant Flow of Light Falls on the Land* (Figure 2). These titles form an obvious connection to the struggles of Christ, and also signpost a connection to wilderness.[26] In addition to this, the titles draw attention to the denotations

[26] William McCahon also believes they may indicate the literal wilderness: a Muriwai seascape ("The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing Through the Wall of Death, 1971," in Browne, *Three Paintings*, 18).

of light and dark within the works. The areas of negative space are described as a black landscape and the "wall of death." The orange "T" and "I" symbols are connected to light that penetrates darkness and falls upon the land.

This dark void may be read as a testing ground for formless spiritual matters. For example, Gordon H. Brown believes the"wall of death" may be a reference to "the personal contemplation of life after death by the vanquishment of doubt through belief in spiritual rebirth." Nevertheless, he asks "was not that shadowy gateway where McCahon's spirituality stumbled?"[27] This is an odd choice of words, given that there is nothing in the painting that demands a positive or optimistic interpretation. Brown calls McCahon's wilderness a site for self-exploration, comparable to that which Christ ventured into.[28] In keeping with his prophetic mantle, it is likely that McCahon wished to inspire his audience to undertake a similar journey, or to communicate the results of his own spiritual explorations via his repeated symbolic lexicon. In terms of the golden light, McCahon describes his artworks, in the inscription to *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing into a Dark Landscape*, as an "homage to van der Velden." William McCahon explains that his maternal grandmother boarded with the van der Veldens in Christchurch and almost certainly communicated with her son about Petrus. McCahon was particularly inspired by van der Velden's motto: "Colour is light—light is love—Love is God."[29] Within the darkness of human doubt and mortality, McCahon places the transcendent glory of a loving God.

The Necessary Protection series formally commenced in 1971 with a highly abstract exploration of the Tau cross. These initial artworks, most of which carry the same name, are pared down to repetitive shapes based on the Tau. The biggest indicator of meaning is found in *Necessary Protection Passing Through the Wall of Death* (Figure 3), which presents a philosophy of maturation[30] and connects the bright and dark spaces back to the meaning of the Days and Nights paintings. These artworks are difficult to penetrate without a comprehensive understanding of McCahon's oeuvre. An uninformed viewer is unlikely to understand their connection to Muriwai, and

[27] Gordon H. Brown, "Colin McCahon: Belief, Doubt, A Christian Message!" In Browne, *Three Paintings*, 31.

[28] Ibid., 28.

[29] McCahon, "Days and Nights in the Wilderness," 18.

[30] It reads: "Growing up's wonderful if you Keep your eyes closed tightly, and if you manage to forget, take your soul with you."

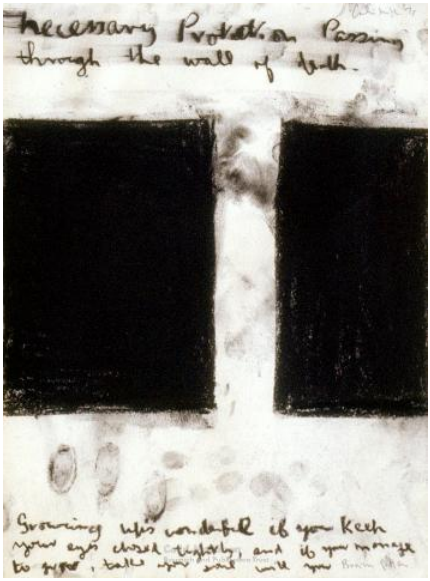

Figure 3: Colin McCahon, *Necessary Protection Passing Through the Wall of Death* (1971) http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000981

thus miss the highly localised spiritual message. Although it is not immediately clear to those unfamiliar with McCahon's imagery, the two blocks of colour represent a cliff by the ocean and a vertical stack of rocks that is Motutara Island, which forms the well-known gannet-nesting colony off the coast of Muriwai, an important symbol within McCahon's body of work. So meaningful was this location that McCahon's ashes were scattered there by his family after his death.[31]

In contrast to many modernists, McCahon did not seek or move towards abstract refinement for its own sake. Many of his works, including the Necessary Protection series, show a progression *towards* recognisable scenery. This demonstrares the primacy of prophetic communication in McCahon's aims as a painter. He did not wish for his message of "Necessary Protection" to be lost or ignored. Indeed, the Light Falling Through a Dark Landscape artworks (1971–1972) help to emphasise the naturalistic elements of the Necessary Protection series. *Muriwai. Rain. Light Falls Through a Dark Landscape* contains the washed-out impression of a deluge. McCahon's diagonal strokes

[31] Matthew Gray, "Symbolic Resting Place for Artist," *Western Leader*, November 17, 2009.

Figure 4: Colin McCahon, *Light Falling Though a Dark Landscape* (1972)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm001438

allude to rain falling between the cliffs. *Cross II* shows a sunrise or sunset between the cliffs in which a band of yellow light illuminates the sand. *Light Falling Though a Dark Landscape* (Figure 4) presents realistic colours. Sea and sand meet, creating turquoise foam. Brown birds flutter through a vivid blue sky. *Light Passing Through a Dark Landscape* depicts a murky seashore, a blue and yellow sky filled with sunlight and a flock of birds. All these images display the Tau cross with clarity, and it seems as though representation of this symbol is their primary aim. Despite this, McCahon does not neglect his representation of the physical landscape. He makes it clear that Necessary Protection dwells within nature. The metaphysical light is clearly correlated with the sunlight illuminating Muriwai.

In 1972, McCahon produced *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* (Figure 5), a painting that clearly shows a local beach. The Tau cross symbol in the form of a "T," or McCahon's ubiquitous "I," may be found in the top left-hand corner. The base of this motif is the ocean, and the top is made from the sky. The cliffs carve out its sides. McCahon appears to be clarifying his symbol by placing it in the environment from which it was spawned.

Figure 5: Colin McCahon, *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* (1972)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000659

This didactic explanation for the migration from abstraction seems highly likely when considering McCahon's desire to teach and reform his pupils. In the words of Ron O'Reilly, McCahon was "not interested in doing things with shapes, colours and textures simply for their own sakes."[32] Green agrees, stating that McCahon's formal inheritance is representation and meaning, not abstraction.[33] McCahon did not aim to explore the formalist purity of colour and form. He aimed to deliver a message that was heavily indebted to the landscape. Again, the enlightenment of God is presented in the bright yellow sunshine and ocean foam. McCahon's religious guidance is clearly founded in the physical world of New Zealand as much as it is in the timeless metaphysics represented by geometric patterns.

Tony Green writes evocatively of the possible impact of *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* upon the viewer:

> Tau-crosses and capital Is held you till you'd seen how each image changed its references as you went over each edge, clustering symbolisms growing from one simple image. Upright Cross, light between cliffs, heavenly light falling to earth, eternal continuity of light in heaven, its momentary flash to earth, salvation, truth, path, way, a chart laid out on the floor on which

[32] Ron O'Reilly, in McCahon, *McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, 14.

[33] Tony Green, "McCahon and the Modern," in *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, by Colin McCahon (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988), 35.

> McCahon sweeps paint along edges, aiming at a steadiness of motion (emotion), shifting levels of meaning, not a single easy answer. You accumulate them slowly standing there.[34]

This multi-layered series offers numerous viewpoints and readings. Wystan Curnow admits that "*Necessary Protection* can be read as either landscape or Tau cross. We are offered alternate takes in which the space is either representative of real space or is purely symbolic space."[35] Indeed, one's perspective varies between a conceivable, natural landscape and areas of pure symbolic colour.[36] From one vantage, *A Necessary Protection Landscape* (1972; Figure 6)[37] looks like dark cliffs in a choppy ocean, offset by birds hovering in the sky. Additionally, the dichromatic rectangles recall McCahon's calligraphy on a plain background, reminiscent of chalk on a blackboard. The viewer's vision can shift from black rectangles surrounded by a white background to the inverse. The white area of the work can be seen as a distinct letter "I" on McCahon's dark chalkboard. There is, of course, no set or correct way to view this image, and McCahon endorsed no particular interpretation of it.

In its ambiguity, *A Necessary Protection Landscape* merges several themes into one image and allows the viewer to drift between them. The work represents a vast seascape and a single letter. One may vacillate between numerous forms, contemplating the primal structure of landscape and the religious significance of familiar symbols. In addition to this complexity, even if the viewer were to be interested in what McCahon himself had intended, this cannot be known with certainty. A particular image derived from the artwork may be no more than the viewer's own imagination conjuring a scene or symbol that was never proposed by the artist, a common problem in the reading of art. Thus doubt can creep into the reception of works as well as their creation. Curnow explains: "these incompatibilities occur because there can be no one anecdote, no complete explanation."[38] Necessary Protection

[34] Tony Green, "Colin McCahon's 'Necessary Protection' in Auckland," *Art New Zealand*, no. 11 (Spring 1978): 33.

[35] Wystan Curnow, "Thinking About Colin McCahon and Barnet Newman," *Art New Zealand*, no. 8 (November/December/January 1977–78): 52.

[36] The complex layers of meaning in McCahon's communication shall be explored at the end of this paper.

[37] Due to the repetitious nature of the Necessary Protection artworks, it is difficult to know which of the 1972 works (*Muriwai: Necessary Protection* or *A Necessary Protection Landscape*) Curnow references. I have chosen the latter, as it seems to fit the description more easily.

[38] Curnow, "Colin McCahon and Barnet Newman," 52.

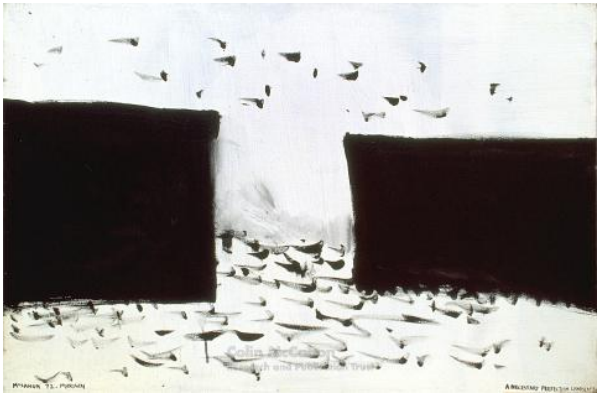

Figure 6: Colin McCahon, *A Necessary Protection Landscape* (1972)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000209

is a journey towards McCahon's spiritual views on landscape, where lessons about its power can be accentuated by the viewer's evolving understanding of the artist's symbolic vocabulary.

The aforementioned symbol of birds, represented in *A Necessary Protection Landscape* as small dots, is recurrent throughout McCahon's body of work. In associated works, he explicitly labels them as gannets and godwits.[39] Importantly, McCahon has also used small dots to represent souls ascending to heaven, as in the Elias series. Birds thus function as his symbol of the human spirit.[40] A possible starting point for this motif is *Dear Wee June* (1945). This painting shows a tombstone with a white bird carved on top.[41] The bird appears to signify the soul of the dead child. *The Care of Small Birds: Muriwai* (1975; Figure 7) shows the cliffs as protectors of birdlife, coupled with a complicated symbol that evokes Catholic rosary beads, a string of roses, and a Polynesian floral necklace all at the same time. This image borrows strongly from the Rosegarden series (1974), which focuses on the rosary.[42] McCahon

[39] For example, *Gannets Leaving Muriwai* (1977), *Godwits, Muriwai* (1973).

[40] Neil Rowe, "Notes Towards a McCahon ABC," *Art New Zealand*, no. 8 (November/December/January 1977–78): 45.

[41] This was modelled on a child's tomb in a cemetery above Port Chalmers in Otago. (Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 44).

[42] Brown connects McCahon's adoption of this symbol to an experience he and the artist had while walking in the evening in the late 1960s. One particular house caught their attention as it had a visible, illuminated window without drawn curtains. Upon peering in,

Figure 7: Colin McCahon, *The Care of Small Birds: Muriwai* (1975)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000274

also used birds as an anti-materialist motif. He noted that the fairy terns of Muriwai are taught to fly, swim, and find food regardless of human intrusion in the area and thus exist outside of the mundane world.[43] Even McCahon's tiny dots form a very complicated web of symbology and implied meaning.

McLeavey Sat Here (1975; Figure 8), a sketch made with felt pen, further clarifies the symbolic language of the Muriwai artworks. The title refers to Peter McLeavey, McCahon's dealer in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand.

Brown saw what he calls a "small family shrine," festooned with photographs, flowers, and rosary beads. He was strongly reminded of this composition when first seeing the Angels and Bed artworks, and also in the loop of dots that appears in images such as *McLeavey Sat Here*. Following along with his warning against reading too much personal data into McCahon's images, Brown sounds a note of warning: "a person with access to knowledge of such events or ideas which exist outside the immediate perception of anyone contemplating the imagery so engendered must treat the awareness of such private or semi-private stimuli with respect, accepting them for what they are and not reading into them implications not self-evident in the painting as an integrated work of art"(Ibid., 180).

[43] McCahon in *Earth/Earth* (Auckland: Barry Lett Galleries, 1971).

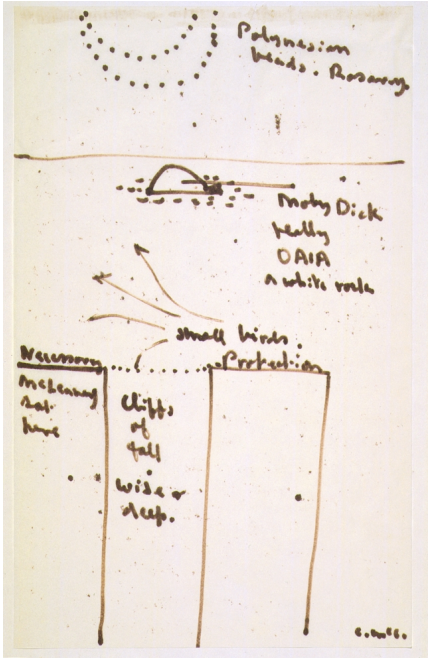

Figure 8: Colin McCahon, *McLeavey Sat Here* (1975)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000688

This preparatory drawing shows a "T" shape made from two cliffs against the ocean. McCahon writes "Necessary ..... Protection" across them. The Tau cross emerges from the landscape, bringing protection that speaks both of natural structures and of the metaphysical protection of Christ. McCahon also reiterates his Polynesian necklace symbology, refers to the dots as small birds, and explains the local origins of his "Moby Dick" theme. It is clear that McCahon wished to emphasise his recurring motifs, rather than allowing them to be lost within the rhetoric of formalist abstraction. Indeed, McCahon claimed that his drawings generally follow the paintings they connect to, rather than preceding them. He describes said drawings as "just solving the problems I didn't solve at first in the paintings."[44] As we will soon see when looking at his reception, the ambiguities of his symbolic lexicon seem to have given him ample cause for these revisions and clarifications.

[44] *McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, 29.

Jetting Out From Muriwai

McCahon's Jet Out sketches expand upon cross-based symbology used for the human soul.[45] They were created in a period when McCahon had cause to think a great deal about death.[46] After one of his friends lost his wife, McCahon pondered on a gift to commemorate the event. It took him a year to decide on *Muriwai* (1974). In the meantime, he was inspired to create the Jet Out series. So ingrained is the connection between these works that *Muriwai* is usually hung with one of these drawings by its side.[47] It is thus unsurprising that this series deals with symbology concerning the posthumous journey of the soul. Neil Rowe points out McCahon's use of airplanes as a symbol of the human spirit dating back to their historically inaccurate insertion in *I Paul to You at Ngatimote*.[48] Importantly, McCahon also employs his plane symbol in the journey of Moses to the Promised Land, reminding us of its connection to the prophets. As such, this series may be read as an important development of the soul motif, which sits in dialogue with seemingly disparate portions of McCahon's oeuvre.

McCahon scholars and art critics have offered many theories regarding the symbolic layering of the flying cross. For example, Curnow points out the mutation of the Tau cross symbol into that of a plane.[49] *Aeroplane and Necessary Protection* of Easter 1973 is a useful example of this. Based on the artwork's title, the Westernised Christian cross can be seen as a landing aircraft. This reading is a popular one; indeed, Gregory O'Brien believes that McCahon's airplane symbol "prefigures and enacts the flight of the human soul leaving its earthly garden." He connects this with Patrick Hayman's *The Dark Plane Takes off at Evening* (1988) where "the dark plane is a crucifix"

[45] There are fourteen Jet Out drawings, which is a purposeful evocation of the tradional Stations of the Cross. For further ways in which McCahon employed the Muriwai environment in combination with this ritual, see Zoe Alderton, "Out With the Tide: Colin McCahon and Imaginative Pilgrimage," in *Philosophies of Travel*, ed. Alex Norman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), forthcoming.

[46] McCahon lost several close friends from 1971 to 1973, including Charles Brasch, R. A. K. Mason, and James K. Baxter. His mother also died in 1973. Baxter's death was the primary allusion of the Beach Walk and connected series. For an in-depth analysis of the impact of Baxter on McCahon's coastal art, see Alderton, "Out With the Tide."

[47] *Behind Closed Doors: New Zealand Art From Private Collections in Wellington* (Wellington: Adam Art Gallery, 2011), 10.

[48] Rowe, "Notes Towards a McCahon ABC," 45.

[49] Wystan Curnow, "McCahon and Signs," in *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, by Colin McCahon (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988), 51.

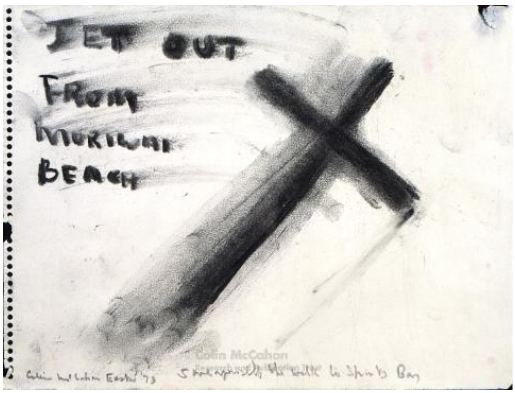

Figure 9: Colin McCahon, *Jet Out From Muriwai Beach* (1973)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm001579

and Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism series.[50] O'Reilly connects McCahon's use of spacecraft to an allusion of moving art beyond its usual confines.[51] The plane may indeed be a signifier of art moving into unusual spiritual realms. The flight of a plane also makes for an obvious comparison to the bird/soul symbol alighting from the Muriwai coast. In the associated *Beach Walk Series A* painting, Brown observes vapour trails from aircraft penetrating through the mist of Muriwai like shafts of light. He connects these "straight and certain" pathways to aircraft, sure of their destinations, that have left the scene.[52] This may well indicate spiritual success and migration.

The major questions presented by these artworks are: where are the planes flying to, and why is the viewer ejected from the nourishing safety of a Muriwai nest via McCahon's 'GET OUT' command? The first question is answered by works such as *Jet Out from Ahipara* and *Jet Plane to Reinga and the Three Kings*. Traditional Māori belief systems include the notion of a non-substantial part of the human being that becomes separated from the physical body after death. This entity is known as the *wairua* and is translated as soul or spirit. This spirit migrates to an afterworld known as *Reinga*, which it accesses via a walk northwards. The spirit eventually reaches a leaping place, which is now known as Cape Reinga, and jumps from this point

[50] Gregory O'Brien, "The Dark Plane Leaves At Evening," *Sport*, no. 21 (Spring 1988): 43.

[51] *McCahon: A Survey Exhibition*, 14.

[52] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 173.

into the realm of the dead.[53] Importantly, although he references Māori concepts, McCahon presents these ideas via Christian symbols. *Jet Out From Muriwai Beach* (Figure 9) shows McCahon's aeroplane/cross symbol taking off with the captions "JET OUT FROM MURIWAI BEACH" and "save yourself the walk to Spirits Bay." As Spirits Bay is a small beach near Cape Reinga, McCahon appears to invalidate the necessity for a walk to the afterlife, a metaphysical thought expressed again through the specificity of the North Island landscape. Perhaps McCahon is claiming that the crucifixion has permitted a relaxation of the need to posthumously conduct this ritual.[54]

Jumps and Comets

McCahon's Jump series exemplifies and explains this strange command. His idea of "necessary protection" is built upon the security of the Muriwai gannet colony where the nestlings are born and raised. In nature, nestlings must burst free of their protective nests as part of the maturation process. The Necessary Protection artworks are a safe place for the spirit to grow. Once this time is over, the spirit must make greater leaps of faith, like a bird that has grown mature wings. Brown recounts his friend's particular observations of the Muriwai gannet colony, which led to this allegorical series. McCahon had already determined that the rocky outcrop where the birds nested was a protective force. He then came to understand that it was also an obstacle. The gannets would have to negotiate strong offshore winds to land in their nests, and had a great height to dive from when fishing. Thus the chasm between the cliffs of the mainland and the nesting refuge on Motutara Island was a "Necessary Protection," which also had to be conquered for the sake of survival and progression.[55] In his Jump series, McCahon intended to discuss the tension between freedom and protection that was so neatly represented in the natural structures of Muriwai.

[53] R. S. Oppenheim, *Māori Death Customs* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1973), 95. McCahon's interest in this mythology was sparked by Matire Kerema's *Tale of the Fish*. See: Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, "An Ornament for the Pāhekā: Colin McCahon's Parihaka Triptych," in *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance*, ed. Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O'Brien, and Lara Strongman (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2001), 131.

[54] It is tempting to read McCahon's command for us to 'GET OUT' as a reference to death. Even though it may be, this is only one possible meaning. Although death may be the ultimate spiritual maturation, McCahon is referring to leaps of faith in general, not just the posthumous leap off Cape Reinga, as we will see below.

[55] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 174.

Figure 10: Colin McCahon, *Three Jumps* (1974)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000489

This allegory also works on a personal level for McCahon. Revealingly, O'Brien believes that the Muriwai artworks speak of the nurturing impulse in living creatures. They "nourish and protect the spirit." He also suggests that McCahon aims "to challenge and breach the limits of the physical world."[56] This notion may also be related to the journey of the artist and his creations. After interviewing McCahon, Sheridan Keith came to the conclusion that his studio was a sacred place where his unfinished artworks were given protection. She describes it as a sanctuary where new paintings that still required his protection resided before they took on their independent lives.[57] This is a clear reflection of the philosophy espoused in the Necessary Protection and Jump series. Debuting new material outside of the protective studio was a risky act for McCahon, but one that was necessary for his communication with an audience. Thus, the prophetic role that McCahon assigned himself made stepping outside the necessary protection of his studio a crucial leap of faith in its own right.

However, McCahon's art is not just about the protective side of the spirit; it also explicitly encourages the viewer to push their limitations for the sake of greater discovery. *Three Jumps* (1974; Figure 10) provides a clear example of how this series continues the dialogue of Necessary Protection. The middle panel shows a Tau cross, while the others depict cliff faces of Muriwai. The naturalistic colours make the scene appear dark and stormy. The

[56] Gregory O'Brien, "Big Tree Transmission: McCahon's Tau Cross," in *After Bathing at Baxter's: Essays and Notebooks* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 206–7.

[57] Sheridan Keith, "Colin McCahon: A Very Private Painter—The Artist in Conversation with Sheridan Keith," *New Zealand Listener* (May 17, 1980): 33.

structures seem to be cloaked in sea mist. The command "JUMP," written in an imperative manner, is repeated on each panel. Dotted diagonal lines cut across the frame, marking out the trajectory of the jump and alluding to its spiritual dimensions. The work is forceful in its direct demands, which match the complex interplay between faith and fear that can be observed in McCahon's imagery.[58]

Through this artwork, McCahon asks us to take a conscious plunge from our zone of safety. Interestingly, his paintings do not often portray the end point of the leap. The dotted line ends in the very corner, or terminates in an unseen point outside the frame. Hence, it is possible that McCahon's advice leads the soul to crash into the ground. In a letter to O'Reilly, he explained, "the jump painting's about when the spirits going north to Reinga meets what has become my necessary protection symbol. What does he do but jump? It's all serious but funny too."[59] It would seem that the soul's eventual crash is a black-humoured joke. Brown considers the potentially negative readings of this series to be an important part of its meaning. He believes the jump depicted speaks of chance and risk, not necessarily success. McCahon implies that growth requires a gamble.[60] His Jump artworks reveal that the drive for transformation leads perhaps inevitably to varying levels of success. McCahon's leaps of faith are not necessarily fruitful. He uses the landscape to make a point about doubt, fear, and giving oneself over to faith when rewards are not guaranteed.

The command to jump is continued in the Comet series (1974). Inspiration for this series may have come from the comet Kohoutek[61] that flew over Mt Taranaki on October 4, 1882. This inspired Ralph Hotere's work,[62] and links the comet series with McCahon's ongoing interest in the Taranaki

[58] Leonhard Emmerling suggests that the concept of a jump "refers to the urgency of his hope that the jump from doubt to belief may succeed. It may even express the dilemma that belief is only possible through the jump, despite of and because of all doubts" (*Out of This World* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2010), 37).

[59] Colin McCahon in Robin Scholes et al., dirs., *I Am: Colin McCahon*, DVD (1974; Auckland: Distributed on behalf of TVNZ by Roadshow Entertainment (NZ), 2006).

[60] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 174. It is also possible that *Three Jumps* shows departing spirits landing in the hole in the seabed that some iterations of Māori mythology say leads to the next world.

[61] This comet spawned many references in popular culture and influenced David Berg in his prophesying of the apocalypse.

[62] Paul Morris, "The Provocation of Parihaka: Reflections on Spiritual Resistance in Aotearoa," in Hohaia, O'Brien, and Strongman, *Parihaka*, 116.

region, several hundred kilometres south of Muriwai.[63] The comet is also a symbol of the unknown and what lies beyond the realm of the tangible world. Jan White poses several possible connections to the celestial symbology of artists who McCahon studied, including Albrecht Altdorfer's *Nativity* (ca. 1511) and Albrecht Dürer's *Melancolia I* (1514). These artists used symbols such as comets and flaming stars to communicate biblical messages, and as reflection of a belief in the connections between heavenly and earthly life.[64] This idea of a bridge between God and the human is indeed an important part of McCahon's work of this era. Adding to these nuances, Leonhard Emmerling provides an interesting summary of the otherworldliness implied by the comet:

> The depiction of the comet approaching earth from outer space and returning into the darkness of infinity represents man making contact with what surpasses him. To imagine the infinity of the universe and the unimaginable distances from which the comet comes and the indescribable depths into which it disappears, represents an act of thought which requires reflection beyond one's own limits, and therefore requires the jump into the supersensible.[65]

Indeed, this motif helps to reconcile the impossible and unimaginable with the real. As the comet negotiates the unfathomable regions of outer space, so too may the individual negotiate or grasp the (potentially) unfathomable concept of religious faith.[66]

These works may also be read as a personal statement. At the time of the series' creation, McCahon's confessed to Luit Bieringa: "I still believe in my God, but he has changed a bit."[67] As such, Brown describes the Comet series

[63] Indeed, Curnow labels these artworks as "night watch paintings" that follow the comet Kohoutek across the beach at Muriwai (Wystan Curnow, "Four Years in the History of Modern Art," in Burke et al., *TOI TOI TOI*, 21).

[64] Jan White, "Celestial Phenomena: Colin McCahon" (paper presented at INSAP III: The Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena, Hotel La Torre, Palermo, January 4, 2001), http://www.astropa.unipa.it/INSAPIII/Memsait/White%20Jan.doc.

[65] Emmerling, *Out of This World*, 37.

[66] Emmerling (ibid., 41) phrases this as an act of grasping the sublime. Similarly, Brown speaks of the mind reaching out and extending in order to "grasp the implications of such a cosmic event" (*McCahon: Artist*, 178).

[67] McCahon to Luit Bieringa (1974) in ibid., 177.

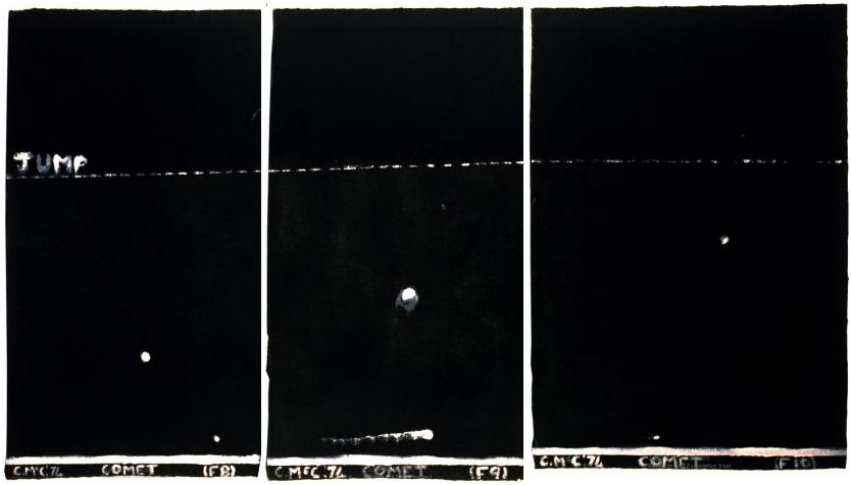

Figure 11: Colin McCahon, *Comet Triptych (F8 F9 F10)* (1974)
http://mccahon.co.nz/cm000672

as a register of change and a movement in time.[68] Although McCahon had by no means abandoned his interest in the Christian God, this series is a good demonstration of the way in which his belief and expression are mutated via experimentation and thought. As with the Jump series, the Comet artworks may also be read as expounding upon the values of development and risk in order to encourage the viewer toward spiritual maturity. For example, the *Comet Triptych (F8 F9 F10)* (1974; Figure 11) contains a horizontal line made of many tiny dots. The first panel gives the instruction "JUMP," although gravity does not seem to claim the leaper in this painted environment. Here, the bird/soul seems to be floating, unrestricted and unchallenged by gravity. No leap is possible where there is no necessary protection. McCahon seeks perhaps to demonstrate the stasis of the spiritual life without nourishment, protection, fear, and challenges.

McCahon and his Reception

These artworks form a complex study of spiritual ecology and the frightening journey of spiritual growth. To fully unravel the entirety of McCahon's message, they are best read as parts of a cohesive whole. For this reason, the

[68] McCahon to Luit Bieringa (1974) in ibid., 177–78.

responses (or lack thereof) to the above artworks and series indicate schisms in the audience reception of McCahon's art and ideas. McCahon's Days and Nights, Light Falling Through a Dark Landscape, Necessary Protection, Jet Out, Jump, and Comet series introduce and explore McCahon's Tau cross symbol, which became a key motif in his body of work. For this reason, they have received significant academic attention. Necessary Protection in particular is a well-discussed series.[69] The academic audience seems engaged and even moved by these pieces. For example, Bieringa warns "a sudden confrontation with works like *Red and Black* can leave one momentarily stunned."[70] Green reads the series as "simultaneously a landscape and a talisman."[71] In contrast, Charles Brasch calls the Days and Nights series "blank cheques" and finds them unconvincing and unbelievable.[72] Nevertheless, this reaction demonstrates a sincere consideration of their content.

It is far harder to locate popular audience reactions with any certainty. These works have not sparked the same degree of discussion and celebration from McCahon's non-academic audience as his familiar landscapes or iconic text-based works. McCahon himself predicted that his Necessary Protection works were "probably hard to take,"[73] which continues to ring true. These images clearly fit within McCahon's prophetic pedagogy. They are instructions to his audience at the same time they speculate on the journey of death and the maturation of the human soul. McCahon seems to scream out his message, repeating phrases in capital letters and delivering numerous versions

[69] It is also a highly popular series in terms of subsequent artistic quotation, as is McCahon's "I AM" motif. Many prominent artists have borrowed from the Necessary Protection symbols, including Imants Tillers and Mervyn Williams. The importance of McCahon in the modern and contemporary New Zealand artworld should not be underplayed. Although it falls outside of the boundaries of this particular paper, the influence of McCahon on other artists is revealing of the popularity of his motifs in this particular circle.

[70] Luit Bieringa, "There is Only One Direction," *Art New Zealand*, no. 8 (November/December/January 1977–78): 33.

[71] Tony Green, "Colin McCahon—"Natural [sic] Protection" Barry Lett Galleries," *Arts & Community* 7, no. 12 (December 1971): 13.

[72] Charles Brasch, 14 August, 1971 in Peter Simpson, *Patron and Painter: Charles Brasch and Colin McCahon* (Dunedin: Hocken Collections, 2010), 39. This kind of response is typical of Brasch, who was one of McCahon's major supporters but who often had difficulty accepting new works. For example, he complained that *Crucifixion With Lamp* was "ugly & rather repulsive. I believe most people who saw the Group show thought the same" (Brasch to McCahon, 12 December, 1947 in ibid., 13–14). Brasch would later change his opinion dramatically; by June of 1948 he found the painting so engrossing that he struggled to leave it and soon purchased the work (ibid., 14–15).

[73] McCahon to Peter McLeavey, 13 July, 1971 in Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 167.

of singular themes and viewpoints. He shows a clear desire to teach and alter the spiritual attitudes of his pupils. Despite this, few members of his popular audience seem to have listened, at least not in the ways that McCahon intended.

A scant few travel journalists have picked up on his use of recognisable landmarks. Marieke Hilhorst's Northland travelogue describes "the dark light of Colin McCahon's Ahipara" as a "Kiwi icon."[74] Peter Calder's Muriwai travelogue describes the "the Colin McCahon painting that is the view from the headland between the main beach and Māori Bay: the whale-like hulk of the little island of Oaia and the sky, so often the massive, textured, horizontal bands you see in his canvases."[75] Similarly, Grant Smithies refers to Curio Bay and its "dramatic headland" as something "that could be straight out of a Colin McCahon painting."[76] These remarks draw more from a love of McCahon's landscape elements than they do from a reflection upon the symbolic and religious nuances of the Tau cross. Although McCahon would have been pleased to inspire appreciation of the natural landscape, he seems to have failed in his attempts to pass on the religious revelations imparted to him by Muriwai. Even Green admits that the "colour harmonies" of McCahon's works lacking overt symbols, like those shown at *Earth/Earth* are "impalpable as far as 'meaning' is concerned."[77]

As we have seen, especially through the spiritual pedagogy of Necessary Protection and connected series, McCahon sustained a lasting desire to communicate directly with his audience. His use of repeated symbols, and the grouping together of certain artworks, functioned as a means of expressing his prophetic message as clearly as possible. McCahon had very specific standards of reception for his art. He explains: "I aim at a very direct statement and ask only for a simple and direct response, any other way the message will get lost."[78] His desire to communicate a complex and sustained socio-spiritual message is reflected in his serial approach to his painting. While McCahon's body of work shows stylistic alteration over time, his leitmotifs

[74] Marieke Hilhorst, "On The Road," *New Zealand Herald* (April 11, 2003), http://www.nzherald.co.nz/travel/news/article.cfm?c_id=7&objectid=3350976.

[75] Peter Calder, "Flight of Fancy," *New Zealand Herald* (January 23, 2009), http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=10552914.

[76] Grant Smithies, "Going Wild on the Catlins Coast," Stuff.co.nz, 24 May, 2010, http://www.stuff.co.nz/travel/new-zealand/3730873/Going-wild-on-the-Catlins-coast.

[77] Green, "McCahon—"Natural Protection"," 13.

[78] Colin McCahon in *Centenary Collection: Contemporary New Zealand Painting* (Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1971), 11.

endure throughout. Nevertheless, the artworks under discussion have not had the impact that McCahon desired, and do not seem to have communicated his complex message. For many of his audience, the landscape is not seen as part of God, nor have the environments he painted been passionately preserved as a necessary source of protection.

McCahon and the Complexity of Series

This schism between intended and actual response can be explained with reference to the art historian Erwin Panofsky's Iconology/Iconography framework, and via an examination of McCahon's serial approach to artmaking. In basic terms, iconography asks what a particular work of art depicts. It is the branch of art history that examines the meaning of artworks as opposed to their form.[79] Panofsky bases this on the notion that images need to draw from a visual lexicon in order to be understood as signals of a particular idea or item. Iconographic readings of an artwork involve an understanding of the history of images, and discussion of how symbology within a particular work shows consistency or deviation from this lexicon. This system presupposes a common body of symbols that are understood in a similar fashion by both artist and audience.

Although Panofsky deals with lexicons more broadly, from the arrangement of McCahon's oeuvre, it is clear that he constructed a unique symbolic lexicon of his own. Although these symbols are drawn from certain popular forms of Western culture, their specific meaning within McCahon's body of work is often highly particular, even idiosyncratic. As such, McCahon created groups of paintings in dialogue with one another. These groups are best described as "series,"[80] and are often divided into "closed" and "open" series.[81] McCahon's open series are artworks grouped together by shared symbols despite being created at different times or with different techniques.[82]

[79] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 3.

[80] Curnow ("McCahon and Signs," 50) dates the emergence of series production to McCahon's 1958 research trip to America.

[81] The former refers to his artworks that were created together and often feature similar formal qualities. Many of the artworks in closed series share the same title and are given numbers, for example the *Towards Auckland* (1953–1954) paintings. Brown calls a series of this nature "tightly formed and self-contained"; "each is an integral part of a coherent sequence that has a beginning and ending" (*McCahon: Artist*, 51, 175).

[82] As compared to the closed series, these open series are more difficult to categorise, relying on the recognition of common themes.

Brown identifies open series such as Necessary Protection, which are composed of what he calls "semi-independent sub-series" like the Jump paintings. These sub-series may in turn be open or closed.[83] Expanding this further, Curnow states that McCahon's "life-work" is the "largest and most open of all the open series."[84] Although this is clearly a complicated way of communicating intricate messages, McCahon's use of series was intended as a means of instructing his viewers and guiding them on a spiritual journey in keeping with his mantle of prophecy and evangelism. McCahon asks that we contemplate his symbols and follow them through his multifarious artworks, which are designed to teach and to lead. This has proven, perhaps unsurprisingly, problematic.

The lens of Panofsky is a useful one when attempting to explain why, exactly, McCahon's complex series have been misunderstood or ignored so easily. The most elementary level of Panofsky's iconology is "factual" meaning, based on identifying objects and their interactions. "Expressional" meaning takes this understanding one step further by employing empathy and sensitivity. Panofsky groups these meanings together as they are both based on one's practical, everyday experiences, although he does warn that mistakes are possible even at this basic level of engagement.[85] He calls this grouping "primary or natural subject matter," or the world of artistic motifs. Panofsky enumerates this category as "pre-iconographical description."[86] In applying this to McCahon's *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* (1972), we have a primarily black layer of colour under a white stripe, under a yellow stripe. Two black rectangles stand on the left side of the image.

Panofsky's next stratum is "secondary or conventional subject matter." This layer of meaning is concerned with denotations created through an understanding of customs and social traditions. Motifs are connected with concepts and themes to create a deeper level of understanding.[87] Panofsky emphasises the importance of comprehending literary references and concepts to engage with an image on this level.[88] For example, one would need to

[83] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 175.

[84] Curnow, *McCahon's "Necessary Protection"*, 11.

[85] Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 59.

[86] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 3–5.

[87] Ibid., 6.

[88] Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology," 62.

recognise McCahon's biblical quotations *as* biblical quotations in order to understand the Christian aspect of his art. In terms of *Muriwai: Necessary Protection*, a person familiar with New Zealand geography would understand that Muriwai is a beachside locale. Suddenly the black stripe becomes volcanic sand, the white becomes foamy waves, and the yellow becomes the sky. The black rectangles will remind the informed viewer of the spire of rock off the coastline, which is known as a gannet nesting colony. Those who have not been exposed to New Zealand geography will struggle to unearth this secondary layer of meaning. Fittingly, then, Brown notes that the Bible, Māori history, and knowledge of Western art are some of the "armoury of references required" to read McCahon.[89]

This reference kit is the kind alluded to by Panofsky when he explains that secondary or conventional subject matter, which he calls "iconographical analysis in the narrower sense," "presupposes a correct identification of the motifs."[90] In order to understand McCahon at this level, one must possess the ability to decode his symbolic language and recognise the denotations of pertinent forms. Even recognition of what should *function* as a symbol in McCahon's body of work requires comprehensive study. The tiny dots that simultaneously represent birdlife, roses, and the soul are easily lost. Viewers can be flummoxed by individual pieces due to a lack of holistic understanding. Painting in series allowed McCahon to produce intricate and multilayered statements, but, as has been demonstrated, a viewer must see and consider the entirety of a series if they are to approach McCahon's intended meaning.[91] Brown warns that comprehension of the index of layers requires knowledge of McCahon's entire body of work. The "casual spectator … can be left groping."[92] This obviously privileges those who are well informed.

The third level, "iconographical interpretation," goes deeper still to look for the "intrinsic meaning" or "content" of a piece, synthesising an understanding of its various parts. Panofsky revised his hierarchy of interpretations in 1955, granting this highest level of understanding the title of "Iconology."

[89] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 199.

[90] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 7.

[91] For example, Brown believes that McCahon's series grew, overlapped, and gained "subtler overtones" with the addition of each new work ("The Autobiographical Factor," in *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, by Colin McCahon (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988), 21). Pound likewise feels that a "doubleness or tripleness of meaning" is "typical of McCahon" ("Topographies," 133).

[92] Brown, *McCahon: Artist*, 5.

While iconography is concerned with description and classification, iconology investigates the components of an artwork in order to understand influences, ideas, and artistic inclinations. It arises from "synthesis rather than analysis."[93] Panofsky describes intrinsic meaning as "apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—unqualified by one personality and condensed into one work."[94] This level of understanding calls for intuition as the audience member must gather together information about the artwork, surrounding images, and discourses in order to synthesise a theory of meaning. Iconology goes beyond an understanding of symbology. It asks why an artist made his or her choice of motifs.[95] Panofsky calls for an understanding of essential tendencies of the human mind. He specifies that a correct iconological interpretation relies upon the "correct analysis of images, stories and allegories."[96] This depth of study generally eliminates all but an exceptionally well-informed audience.

Iconological interpretation of *Muriwai: Necessary Protection* calls for an engagement with McCahon's Tau cross as a representation of his unorthodox Christian beliefs and a symbol of the reciprocal relationship between human and God. This level of reading also deals with the prominence of locality in the experience of religiosity and transcendence, placing Christianity in a non-indigenous context. McCahon must be understood as man grappling with the presence and expression of religion in his homeland, and a nationalistic prophet trying to emphasise the spiritual importance of the undomesticated local landscape. In order to achieve this level of iconological analysis, an audience member needs to have studied New Zealand art history in general, and McCahon's body of work in particular, in great depth. In most artworks, McCahon pitches his ultimate messages at this level. Despite numerous clear attempts to reach all subsets of his audience, McCahon's language of expression remains obscure and impenetrable to those who have not had the opportunity to examine his oeuvre and surrounding literature in depth.

This is, clearly, an impediment to the expression of intended meaning. So too is the fact that McCahon simultaneously wished to guide his audience through a complex and didactic labyrinth of symbols while at the same time

[93] Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology," 57–58.
[94] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 7.
[95] Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology," 64.
[96] Ibid., 58.

eschewing an excessively dictatorial style. McCahon was conscious of certain elements of painting that were ineffable or recondite. He felt that arcane secrets existed within art and should not be spoken of. In 1976, McCahon stated:

> There's another layer that has to go into painting before it ticks over. To me you can't explain and I don't think it should be talked about, actually, by anybody … you mustn't talk about what you're doing to other painters and other people. They have to make their own discoveries.[97]

His works seem to offer clues rather than explanations. He dearly wished for his audience to understand him, but not at the cost of diluting spiritual mysteries. McCahon's works are about intuiting his questions, answers, and fears as opposed to simply being told of their existence. The interactive component is vital, but requires a significant amount of commitment and focus.

A complex analysis of McCahon's Muriwai artworks is able to reveal their intended meaning and intended social purpose. The Necessary Protection (and associated) paintings reveal the land as a protective, nourishing force. They introduce environmental issues as spiritual concerns via an appreciation of the landscape as a sacred realm that could be lost without proper treatment and reverence. By reading McCahon's personal statements and studying his symbology in full, a viewer can ascertain the Tau cross as a multifarious symbol that functions as a gateway between God and the human. This idea of bridging the sacred with humanity (via the landforms of Muriwai) is a key prophetic aim for McCahon. He provides a lesson of faith within this web of motifs. McCahon renders the human as a bird that must jump away from protection in order to mature. His theology, written in the language of local wildlife and landforms, is an syncretic blend of traditional Māori and Christian concepts.

Colin McCahon invites viewers of all religious persuasions to find the numinous in Muriwai and gain knowledge of one's spiritual path as a result. Although his aims were wide-ranging and ecumenical, the complexity of McCahon's Muriwai symbology seems to have excluded the broad audience who he was aiming to instruct. Because of McCahon's complex layers of meaning, it is possible (and perfectly legitimate) to read these images as abstract pieces, landscapes, symbolic discourses, or spiritual tools. Although

[97] Colin McCahon in Scholes et al., *I Am: Colin McCahon*.

it is by no means necessary for an artist to produce a comprehensible message, failing to do so can be problematic if the artist wishes to communicate a specific agenda, as Colin McCahon clearly intended to do. His lessons must be read together or important elements are lost. McCahon's paintings and teachings are complex, and interwoven ever more tightly as the years progressed. It is thus rare that an audience member will understand these images of necessary protection as the artist desired. Although the Tau cross is now an iconic symbol of the New Zealand artworld, there is little evidence that McCahon's implementation of an environmentally oriented Christian worldview has had the same impact.