

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

ANNE McCAHON (née HAMBLETT)

[1915-1993 Aotearoa New Zealand]

[Paintings for Children] 1944

Ink, pen, watercolour on paper

Private Collection

[Harbour Scene - Paintings for Children] 1944

Ink, pen, watercolour on paper

Collection of the Forrester Gallery. Gifted by the John C. Parsloe Trust.

[Ships and Planes – Paintings for Children] 1944

Ink, pen, watercolour on paper

Private Collection, Wellington

Colin McCahon met fellow artist Anne Hamblett in 1937 while both studying at the Dunedin School of Art. The couple married on 21 September 1942 and went on to have four children. In the mid-1940s, Anne began a sixteen-year long career as an illustrator, often illustrating children's books, such as *At the Beach* by Aileen Findlay, published in 1943. During this time, the McCahons collaborated on the series known as *Paintings for Children*. This would be the first and only time the couple would produce work together. The subject-matter was divided among the two, Colin was responsible for the landscape, while Anne filled each scene with bustling activity, including buildings, trains, ships, cars and people. These works were exhibited at Dunedin's Modern Books, a co-operative book shop, in November 1945. This exhibition received positive praise from an *Art New Zealand* reviewer, who said:

*“These pictures are the purest fun: red trains rushing into and out from tunnels, through round green hills, and over viaducts against clear blue skies; bright ships queuing up for passage through amazing canals or diligently unloading at detailed wharves, people and horses and aeroplanes overhead all very serious and busy... They will be lucky children indeed who get these pictures – too lucky perhaps because the pictures should be turned into picture books and then every good child might have the lot.”*¹

Two years later, in 1947, a group of Colin McCahon's new paintings were also exhibited at Modern Books. Organised by Rodney Kennedy, this exhibition consisted of ten works including *Otago Peninsula* (1946-49), on display here, *Christ taken from the Cross* (1947), *The Angel of the Annunciation* (1947) and *Woman with lamp* (1947). With a mixture of landscape, figurative and biblical subject matter, it was the first time these paintings were shown in a public context.

1. Quote reproduced in Linda Tyler's, 'I did not want to be Mrs Colin', in *Between the Lives: Partners in Art*, edited by Deborah Shepard (Auckland University Press: 2005), p.42

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Untitled [landscape – Lake Waihola] 1931

Watercolour on paper

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

Untitled [landscape] c.1935

Watercolour on paper

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

above left to right:

Working drawings for three paintings of the Otago Peninsula. Saddle Hill c.1944-1946

Pencil on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

Otago Peninsula landscapes - two drawings

1947

Pencil on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

below left to right:

Harbour Cone, Observatory, Ravensbourne Wharf c.1945-47

Pencil on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

From Portobello? c.1944-1946

Pencil on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

COLIN McCANHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill 1939

Oil on board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

Painted on his return to Ōtepoti Dunedin from a summer spent picking apples in Māpua, Nelson, McCahon considered *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill* to be his first 'landmark' painting – a work that marked a significant moment within his artistic development.

McCahon planned this painting from the vantage point of Peggy's Hill, a summit near Pukehiki that offers an impressive view towards Hereweka / Harbour Cone. Yet equally important to the work was the artist's recent discovery of a book in the Dunedin Public Library, *Geomorphology of New Zealand* by Sir Charles Cotton. The book was illustrated with a series of diagrammatic sketches of the landscape as a structural form, stripped of extraneous surface details. In these images, McCahon found what he described as 'the anatomy of the landscape' – a means of rendering the landscape in its most essential and fundamental form.

McCahon submitted *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill* for the 1939 annual exhibition of the Otago Art Society, of which he was a member. Membership brought with it the right to exhibit one work each year, so McCahon was understandably disturbed to hear from the distance of Motueka, where he was working at the time, that his painting had been rejected by the selection committee. Fellow artists and supporters withdrew their works in protest, as McCahon later wrote to his sister Beatrice '...Doris says that the Council thought I had painted the picture just as a joke on them ... This shows that they are really incapable of judging what is a really good painting'.²

2. Quoted from correspondence between the artist and his sister, reproduced in Peter Simpson's *Colin McCahon – There is only one direction*, (Auckland University Press: 2019), p.49

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Otago Peninsula 1946-1949

Oil on gesso on board

Collection of Dunedin Public Libraries Kā Kete Wānaka o Ōtepoti,
Rodney Kennedy bequest.

Otago Peninsula (1946-49), commissioned by McCahon's friend and supporter Rodney Kennedy, was the second of two large paintings of this subject by McCahon from this time. The first, *Otago Peninsula* (1946), was his largest-to-date and showed the structural, almost skeletal approach to the landscape that had been anticipated in *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill*. This second painting shows a more tonal and modulated painting style, adding depth, perspective and drama to the increasingly simplified composition. It is the more monochromatic and austere of these two paintings - the stacked, repeating landforms anticipating the next phase of McCahon's work.

Otago Peninsula (1946-49) hung above a mantelpiece in Kennedy's home in Royal Terrace, recalled by Charles Brasch in 1955 in his journal. Brasch wrote, 'Colin McCahon's big painting of Otago Peninsula is one of the things I shall miss most when we leave here...Colin has captured in it so remarkably the heroic proportions & brooding spirit of the place itself, but heightened and simplified....I suppose it is the finest landscape ever done in NZ, to be thought of with Buchanan's Milford Sound and nothing else.'³

Rodney Kennedy bequeathed this painting to the Dunedin Public Library in honour of City Librarian Archie Dunningham and wife Peggy, who were advocates of contemporary art in Ōtepoti Dunedin in the 1930s and 40s, working to make exhibition space available at the library when many organisations refused to show the works of young, experimental artists.

3. Quote reproduced in Peter Simpson's *Colin McCahon – There is only one direction*, (Auckland University Press: 2019), p.68

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Saddle Hill from Taieri Mouth 1937-1938

Pencil and gouache on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

From the North end of Tomahawk Beach 1935

Watercolour, pen and ink on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

Many of Ōtepoti Dunedin's beaches, gardens and landscapes became the subject of Colin McCahon's early paintings. Immersing himself in his immediate surroundings, McCahon's paintings looked to Tomahawk Beach, Woodhaugh Gardens, Saddle Hill, the Botanic Garden and the Otago Peninsula as subject matter, among others.

This interest in Tomahawk was shared with one of McCahon's lecturers at the Dunedin School of Art, Robert Nettleton Field; with his oil painting *Tomahawk* (1926) housed in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery collection. Referred to by McCahon as his most influential teacher⁴, R. N. Field was instrumental in the formation of the Six and Four Club in 1928. Initially consisting of six women and four men, this was a group of artists – teachers and students – who would meet to discuss art, exhibitions and everyday life. One attendee was Toss Woollaston, a highly celebrated New Zealand landscape painter whose work made a lasting impression on McCahon early in his career. When speaking of Woollaston's depictions of the Nelson landscape McCahon said:

“I had seen the paintings in a small shop on Broadway, Dunedin, watched over by the painter and by various other people whom I did not then know. But there were the paintings, wonderful and magnificent interpretations of a New Zealand landscape; clean, bright with New Zealand light, and full of air”.⁵

Note: Toss Woollaston's *View of Tomahawk Beach* (1932) is currently on display in the *Style & Substance* exhibition, on the ground floor of the Gallery.

4. Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon – There is only one direction*, (Auckland University Press: 2019), p.44

5. Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', in *Landfall*, volume twenty number four (The Caxton Press: 1966), p.364

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Otago Landscape 1950

Oil on jute canvas on board

Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection

Otago Landscape (1950) was painted when McCahon was living in Ōtautahi Christchurch, having finally managed to secure a home for his growing family after a period spent living apart due to the lack of suitable work and accommodation. His painting had undergone significant shifts in the later years of the 1940s, with the emergence of his biblical paintings, and stark and stylised landscapes drawn from the Nelson and Canterbury regions where he had travelled and worked.

In *Otago Landscape* we see McCahon abandoning depth in his composition, and moving towards a more severe, flattened treatment of the landscape. The hills become increasingly stacked, articulated by strong horizontal and diagonal lines. This painting, and others contemporary to it, anticipate the increasingly abstract depiction of Otago which appeared in McCahon's work in the late 1960s, when he returned to this region's landscape as a dedicated subject.

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Otago Peninsula 1946

Oil on hardboard

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,
purchased 1992 with New Zealand Lottery Grants Boards funds

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago 1967

Acrylic on paper

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery

Purchased 1997 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago 1967

Acrylic on board

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Gifted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago Landscape 1967

PVA on board

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Purchased from bequest funds

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago Landscape 2 1967

PVA paint on hardboard

Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,

purchased 1969 from Wellington City Council Picture Purchase Fund

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago V 1966

Acrylic on paper

Collection of the Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, New Zealand

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago Landscape 10 1967

Acrylic on board

Rotorua Museum Te Whare Taonga o Te Arawa

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago Landscape 1 1967

Polyvinyl acetate on hardboard

Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Purchased with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of NZ and the USA Associates of Ivon Watkins Dow Ltd

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

North Otago Landscape c.1970

Screen print on paper

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

**The North Otago Landscape as described by
Professor C.A. Cotton and seen by Colin McCahon**

1972

Watercolour on paper

Private collection

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Otago Peninsula landscape with Sandy Mount

c.1940

Oil on board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Sketch for landscape from Flagstaff 1942

Oil on board

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

COLIN McCAHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Untitled [study of Otago Harbour] c.1938

Oil on board

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

Looking down on Woodhaugh, Leith Valley 1939

Oil on cardboard

Collection of the Forrester Gallery

Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

COLIN McCANHON

[1919-1987 Aotearoa New Zealand]

Vase of Flowers 1939

Oil on cardboard

Collection of the Forrester Gallery. Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

Dunedin Summer Show at Tahuna Park 1936

Tempera on paper on card

Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

[Botanical Gardens glass house] c.1939

Oil on cardboard

Collection of the Forrester Gallery. Gifted by the Parsloe Family Trust

In the years between 1937 and 1939, McCahon intermittently attended Dunedin School of Art between trips up to the Nelson region for seasonal work. The art school connected him for the first time with a group of fellow students and practicing artists, several of which would become lifelong friends, supporters and allies. Teacher Robert Nettleton Field was greatly influential, providing an example of what McCahon later described as ‘the painter’s life’. Over these years, McCahon built friendships and relationships that would sustain him through much of his career, with people such as Rodney Kennedy, Charles Brasch, Toss and Edith Woollaston, Doris Lusk, James K. Baxter and Anne Hamblett, who McCahon would later marry.

This group of works from the late 1930s are among McCahon’s earliest, illustrating aspects of the landscape around Ōtepoti Dunedin and its surrounding area. The Dunedin Botanic Garden was a popular subject for students of Dunedin School of Art, appearing here in *[Botanical gardens glass house]* (1939). Other works, such as *Vase of Flowers* (1939), show McCahon developing his technique through art-school painting exercises. Other early paintings show locations that were regularly visited by McCahon and his wider family, such as the view of Woodhaugh Gardens painted from the ‘Bullock track’ that leads down into the Leith Valley.

This group of works come from the collection of the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, which holds an important repository of early paintings by McCahon. A significant number of these paintings originated from the collection of McCahon’s sister Beatrice Parsloe and her husband Noel, deposited by the Parsloe Family Trust in 2005 and reflecting the close connections that exist between the McCahon family and the North Otago region.