



Towards a Promised Land: On the Life and Art of Colin McCahon
by Gordon H. Brown.
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Gordon H Brown (b Wellington 1931) is the author of the classic *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Reed, 1984, 1993), *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1967* (with Hamish Keith; Collins, 1969) and the texts to three major exhibition catalogues on New Zealand painting: 1900-1920; 1920-1940; 1940-1960 (QE II Arts Council of New Zealand, 1972, 1975 and 1981). In some respects *Towards a Promised Land: On the Life and Art of Colin McCahon* is the culmination of this scholarship.¹

Once the painter was making signs and symbols for people to live by: now he makes things to hang on walls at exhibitions (McCahon)

McCahon, a gifted teacher and singular artist, sought to recapture the signs and symbols that he believed would, like fertile land, sustain the living. Towards this end he filled his paintings with symbols including written words intended to stir us towards contemplations of what is important about ourselves and our environment. Ultimately, the works are more mindscapes than landscapes, full of old world iconographies, fragments of New Zealand geographies and speech balloons all of which coalesce into evocative auguries.

Richly illustrated, *Towards a Promised Land* covers aspects McCahon's life and artistic journeying: his student days at King Edward Technical College in Dunedin, his mentorship under Toss Woollaston, his years at the Auckland City Art Gallery and Elam School of Fine Arts and myriad friends (found and lost) including fellow visionary James K. Baxter. Text and images offer genuine illuminations on aspects of the artist's work: the role of the Bible, the idea of the promised land in relation to New Zealand and the shaping of a national identity.²

A fellow artist and life-long trusted friend of McCahon, Gordon Brown is uniquely equipped (personally and professionally) to map the art of

one of New Zealand's most complex and influential artists. And he does deliver an extraordinarily intricate and intimate view of the art. But, ultimately this is a study of McCahon the (sometimes gloomy) optimist who painted *The Promised Land* (1948). The book does not, significantly, include *Was this the promised land* (1962). (Note the non-capitalisation).³ And this, perhaps, signals something of the gaps and silences in this book, penned as it is by a stalwart friend and one of our finest art historians.

Towards a Promised Land, despite its scholarship, is a dense book and does not deliver the promise embedded in its title - a cohesive consideration of McCahon, his life and work. Instead is it a collation of seventeen previously published essays and catalogue texts, occasional lectures, gallery floor talks and shorter essays. They are all superb in themselves. But here, even though revised and reworked, they remain separate, intermittently prone to repetition and silent on certain aspects of an artist who has achieved almost sacerdotal status in New Zealand. As a consequence (and even bearing in mind McCahon's latter-day physical ill-health to which Brown was a witness) little is said concerning the artist's loss of religious beliefs and how this affected his artistic vision.

Some of us need the dark in order to understand and appreciate the light. Few New Zealand artists have given us the dark and the light to ponder as McCahon has. If doubt and ambiguity are part of the formative journey, why not say so - especially if it helps us understand work aimed at drawing us into consideration of what is really important.

- 1: Brown was awarded the OBE for his services to Art History. In 1990 he was the Fanny Evans Fellow at the University of Otago, researching McCahon's life and sorting the McCahon family papers destined for the Hocken Library. In 2002, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Literature by Victoria University of Wellington, which also established the Gordon H Brown Lecture Series, named "in honour of the achievements of the distinguished New Zealand art historian" to further art historical scholarship in New Zealand.
- 2: See David Eggleton, 'Painted Words', *Landfall*, 1.5.2011.
- 3: This work is included in *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith* by Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, jointly published by Craig Potton Publishing (Nelson) and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2002).