

## TEACHING AIDS

⊕C+⊕BER 1995 - JANUARY 1996

The NEW Gallery      Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

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"The artist presents us with lessons on blackboards, but the teacher has gone, the pupils also.

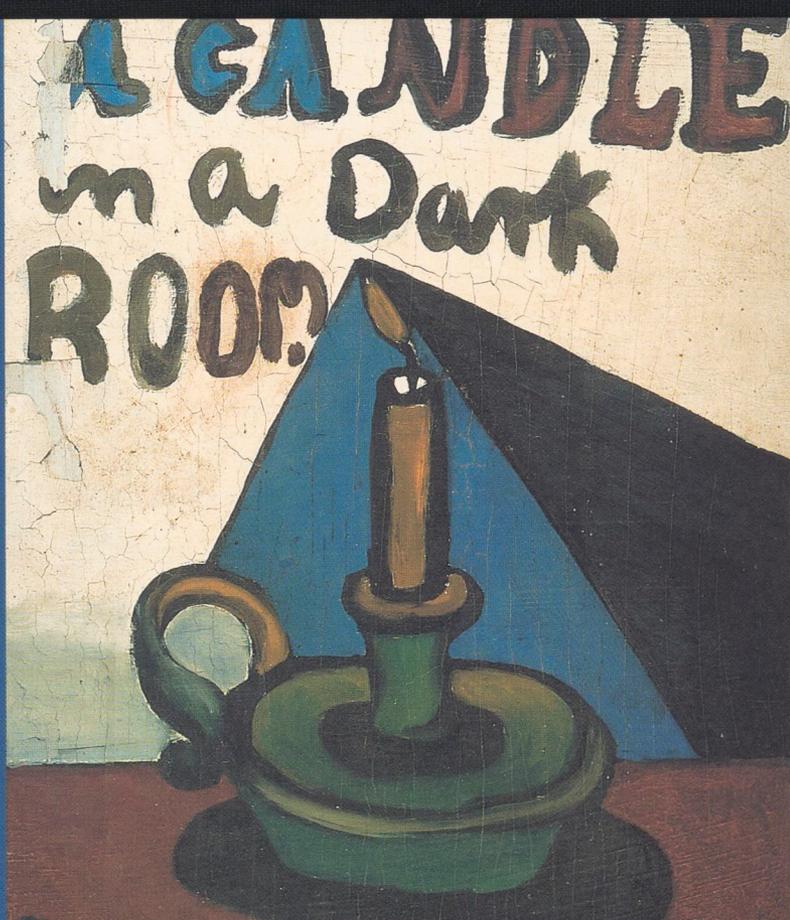
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THE COLIN MCCAHON ROOM

McCahon

Colin McCahon is an outstanding figure in New Zealand visual art of the twentieth century. He was a great painter and a profound thinker. He was also a teacher, curator and critic whose contribution to art in New Zealand is immense and whose international reputation is growing. The Auckland Art Gallery is fortunate in having a large collection of McCahon's work, including many major paintings lent or given to the Gallery by the artist and his family.

The advent of the NEW Gallery has made it possible to have selections of McCahon's paintings always on show. The McCahon Room will also be the focus for new writing and talking about McCahon.

This first exhibition, of McCahon's three sets of Teaching Aids, takes place exactly twenty years after the paintings were first shown at Auckland's Barry Lett Galleries. To mark the occasion the artist's son, William McCahon, has written an essay which brings fresh insights to them and suggests new approaches for the viewer. We also reprint here Wylan Curnow's review of the 1975 exhibition with Colin McCahon's response. Both writers recognise the beauty and importance of these paintings and help us to see them as the artist intended them - aids to teaching, and to learning.

**Alexa M. Johnston**  
Principal Curator

# TEACHING AIDS

AN ESSAY BY WILLIAM MCCAHON

At first sight the *Teaching Aids* series by Colin McCahon appear to be a dense confusion of symbols, lines, words and numerals, all arranged in a tabular form reminiscent of mathematical tables, game scores, lists of prices on boards.

The artist presents us with lessons on blackboards, but the teacher has gone, the pupils also. We can not hear the dialogue that supported this lesson. Rubbing outs and over drawing on some figures leave us bewildered as to what we are being taught. We must follow the artist into the work if we wish to uncover its meaning.

Around 1960 Colin underwent religious instruction in the Catholic Church at the urging of James Baxter. He attended St Joseph's in Grey Lynn at first, and was handed on to the priests at Newman Hall. Friends were made there, but Colin locked horns with the Catholic Church, and possibly Bishop Liston. He was asked to submit to the authority of the Church by swearing belief in the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, normally only required of priests who take confession. Colin could not and his religious training ceased.

**TEACHING AIDS** When originally shown by the artist at Barry Lett Galleries in August 1975, all the panels of these works were pinned to the wall one centimetre apart "about a matchbox width". Coincidentally, at that time the Auckland Star published a photograph of a classroom blackboard which took Colin's fancy. It was pinned to the wall of his studio for some time and caused him to change his mind about the presentation of these works. Later that year he arranged a trial hanging in the Auckland City Art Gallery of the July set of *Teaching Aids 2*, this time with all the sheets butted together - no gaps. This became his preferred method of display, presenting a more unified image. I believe because each sheet is signed and dated, that he thought the sets would be broken up and individually sold, as has happened with much of his work.

The works were nailed or pinned to represent the body of Christ, a sacrament. This method emulates the action of Martin Luther, who in 1517 nailed to a church door in Wittenberg, a series of challenges to the then widespread corruption in the Catholic Church. To air this idea on the sly, I also remember as a child that we used to sing or chant to the tune of 'Onward Christian Soldiers' a doggerel verse made up by Colin:

*Onward Christian pinex, As if to the wall, If it were not for the nails, You would surely fall.*

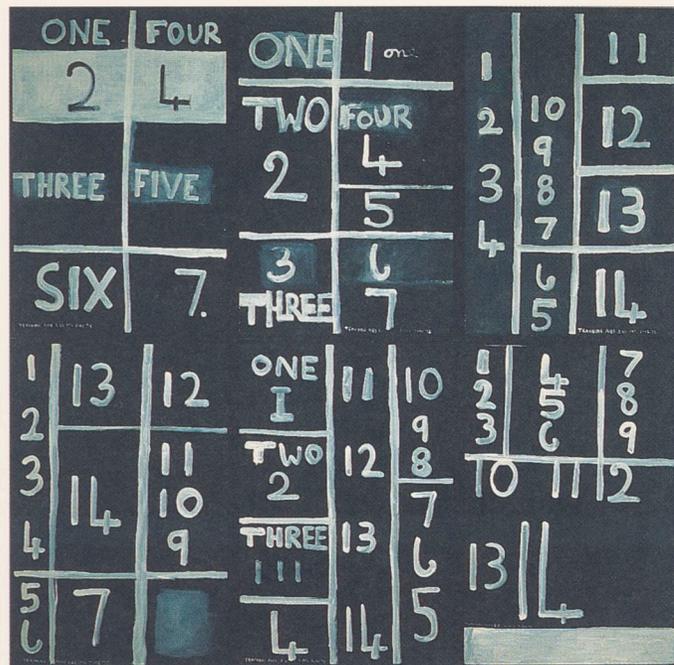
To use pins and nails was an act of courage and symbolism, to present high art in the humblest way possible. The panels of blackened paper set out in blocks of ten sheets are confident individual statements. No mark unintended, each brushload of paint purposeful in an attempt to communicate with the viewer.

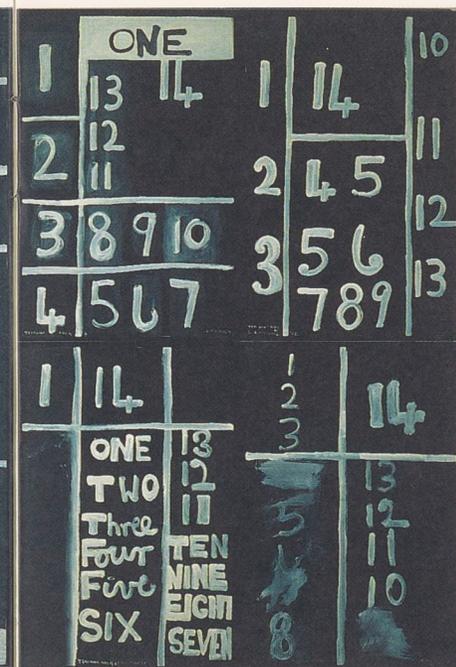
Colin McCahon uses abstract form to suggest with this white paint landscape, waterfalls, light of new beginnings and endings. Drawn from the history of his own art - *North Otago Landscapes*, *Paddocks for sheep*, the *Walk* series and others, these divisions and assemblages can be found again and again in his basic composition. Here it is in bare bones.

To understand more of these three works the viewer must accept that McCahon is using numbers as symbols. I believe he had two main sources. a) The numbers of the fourteen stations of the Cross which are: 1. the sentence passed on Our Lord by Pilate. 2. the receiving of the cross. 3. our Lord's first fall. 4. His meeting with His mother. 5. the bearing of the cross by Simon of Cyrene. 6. the wiping of Christ's face by Veronica with a handkerchief. 7. His second fall. 8. His words to the women of Jerusalem 'Weep not for Me' etc. 9. His third fall. 10. His being stripped of His garments. 11. His crucifixion. 12. His death. 13. the taking down of His body from the cross. 14. His burial/the entombment.

From *Catholic Dictionary*, eds Addis and Arnold. Routledge Kegan Paul, 1951.

b) Numbers drawn from the Catholic Catechism. The Catechism is a guide to living a Catholic Christian life, intended to preserve unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine. It is in four main parts each having numbered Chapters, Articles and Subheadings. The panels in each set are formed according to the diagram opposite. Colin, I think, has not strictly followed the biblical order, but the last four panels hold all the elements of the Eucharist.





1  LESSON	3  CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM	5  THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT	7  LAST SUPPER	9  CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL
2  LESSON	4  THE RAISING OF LAZARUS	6  AGONY IN THE GARDEN OF BETRAYAL	8  CRUCIFIXION AND DEATH	10  RESURRECTION ON THE THIRD DAY

Here are some possible interpretations of these works, based on the above order.

**TEACHING AIDS 2, JUNE 1975** *Panel 1.* Upper left. The numbers seem to be drawn from Part I, Chapter 1, Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the creeds in the Catechism. 1. I believe in God. 2. The Father. 3. The Almighty. 4. The Creator. 5. (of) Heaven and Earth. 6. Man.

7. The Fall of Mankind (Original Sin). The series of numbers 1 to 7 is repeated throughout these works. A three-barred cross, symbol of the Pope. The upper two bars are filled with the light of Genesis. The top four panels (formed by the Papal Cross) connect belief in God (1) and the Father (2) to the Creator (4) before and during creation. The panel finishes with a full stop at the Fall of Mankind. The end of a sequence.

*Panel 2.* Lower left. The Stations of the Cross are ordered into eight panels with the number 8 rubbed out. The numbers spiral into the centre, ending at number 14, the entombment. There is also a separation of the first seven stations repeating the top panel, or the Seven Petitions from the Catechism (The Lord's Prayer).

*Panel 3* speaks in pidgin 'ONE, I one' or Chapter One, Article I, Paragraph one: a trinity ones. Here we reconcile the first lesson the Fall of Man, as the reason for Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

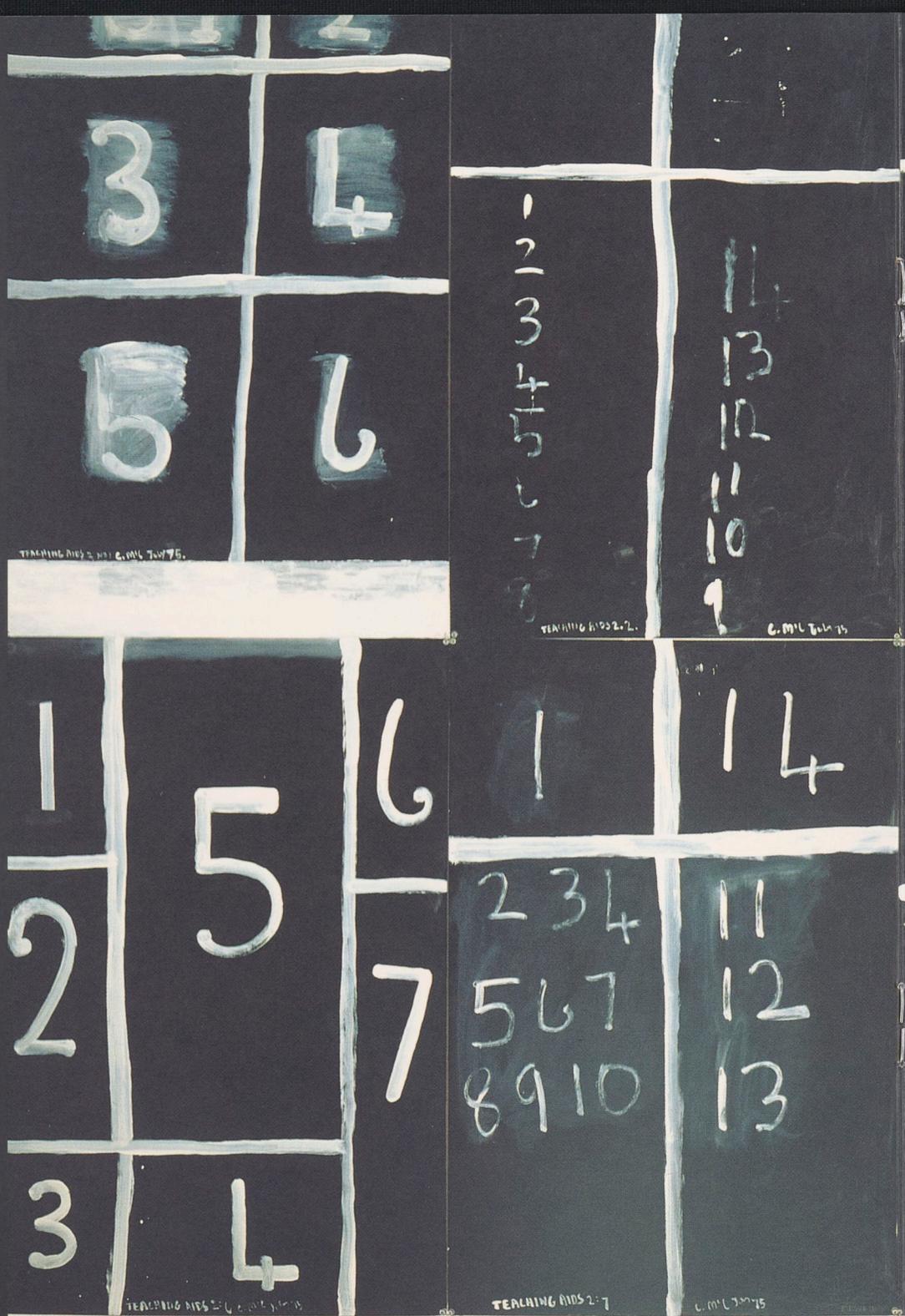
Panel 9. Colin combines a New Zealand icon with the number for the entombment, fourteen, in a star spattered sky. The trinity are spectators beside the rugby goal posts. Number eight in the centre of the pack, beneath the goal.

5 **TEACHING AIDS 2, JULY 1975**

6 Panel 1. The numbers seem to be drawn from Part 1, Chapter 3, Article 12, of the creeds in the Catechism. These are emotional figures. Article 12 reads: 'I believe in life everlasting'  
 1. The Particular Judgement: Death the final encounter with Jesus in his second coming. 2. Heaven. 3. The Final Purification or Purgatory. 4. Hell. 5. The Last Judgement. 6. The Hope of a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Panel 2. Can be drawn from two sources: The Seven Petitions (the Lords Prayer) in which case no 5 is 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others', or The seven articles of Chapters 1 and 2, Part One of the

Teaching Aids 2 July 1975  
 acrylic on paper  
 10 panels, each 1092 x 728 mm  
 McCahon Family Collection



56

1

14

8  
9  
10  
11  
12

TEACHING AIDS 2:8

14

C.M.C. 3/75

2  
3  
4  
5  
6

TEACHING AIDS 2:9

8  
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11  
12

C.M.C. 3/75

TEACHING AIDS 2:10

C.M.C. 3/75

14

14

1 7  
2 8 13  
3 9  
4 10  
5 11  
6 12

TEACHING AIDS 2:8 C.M.C. 3/75

14

TEACHING AIDS 2:9

C.M.C. 3/75

TEACHING AIDS 2:10

C.M.C. 3/75

catechism which describes Christ's past, present and future lives, mortal and spiritual. No 5 then becomes 'He descended into Hell. On the third day he rose again.' The other eight panels follow Christ's eight day journey.

*Panel 3.* Figures line a spiritual road that crosses the horizon into the sky showing the path to be taken. The cross symbol repeated as a theme in this series which connects the earth and heaven across a lit horizon.

*Panel 4.* Christ raises Lazarus, symbolised by the 14th Station, the entombment. I is used to signify God in Christ. The light of the Cross is emphasised.

*Panel 5.* The sermon on the mount. The first lesson is repeated at the top left. The disciples cluster below. Throughout this series the Cross waxes and wanes in accord with the artist's own feelings about the significance of the crucifixion.

**TEACHING AIDS 3** 'The Church must listen to the World and be evangelised.'

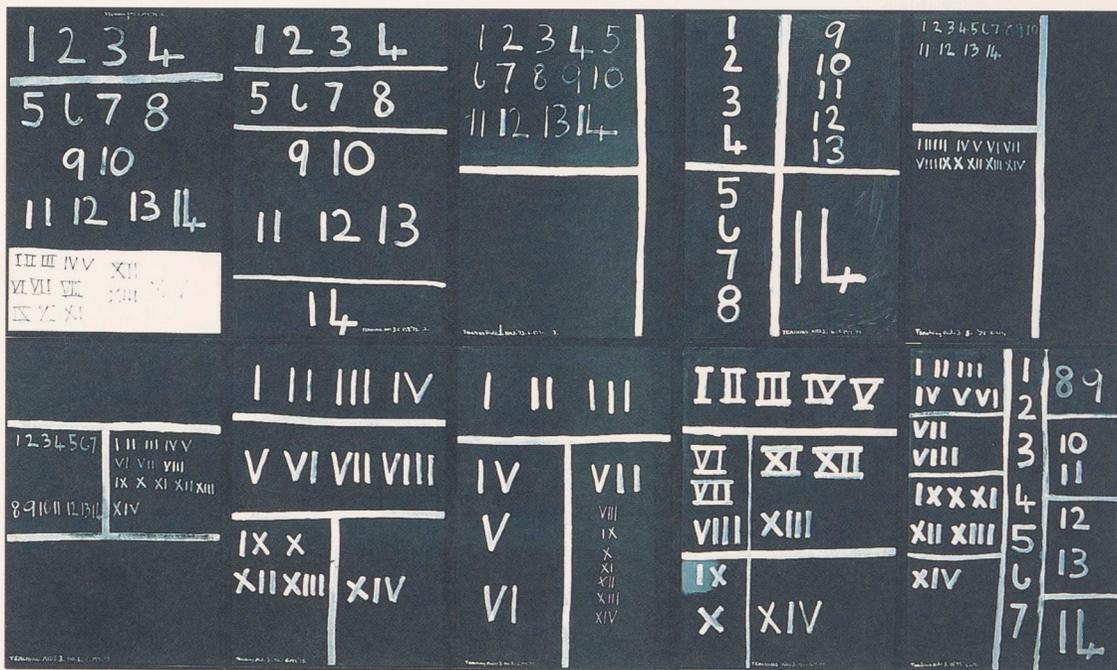
Gustavio Gutierrez, Peru. A supporter of the liberation theology of Latin America.

This series has a different theme. It deals with a reform initially addressed by the Vatican II Council of 1962 - the use of everyday language in the Mass. One of Colin's mentors in the church was Father Michael Shirres, who spent many evenings at our home in Newton Gully. Father Michael would bring wine and tape recordings of Masses sung in other languages and they would drink wine and listen to them together. Father Michael enthusing on differences and nuances which he could distinguish through his familiarity with the form of the Catholic Service. In this work I think Colin talks to Father Michael, the church, and perhaps about his own journey in the church. The symbolism is drawn more clearly from his own work with landscape.

*Panel 1.* The common language Arabic numerals are above Roman numerals which represent the Latin of the church. The composition is confined to three broad areas representing the Trinity. The top line broken between numbers 3 and 4, thus underlining the numbers 1, 2 and 3 of the Trinity.

*Panel 2.* Three broad areas, again the middle one is divided. A suggestion of the fall of water and/or light through a hill form into a reflective pool, and also the open pages of a book. The lesson of seven is repeated, common Arabic numerals opposite the Roman.

*Panel 10.* The Resurrection. The four books of the Catechism are organised as blocks on each side of a road; the path between the two languages of the church. The lesson of the seven numbers repeated. Numbered to symbolise the possible rise to a pinnacle heaven, from the fall of mankind (7) through belief in God the Creator. By twisting the image visually the panel becomes a tree of life, branches bearing birds and/or leaves.



**CONCLUSION** With or without the added layer of meaning provided by Colin's involvement with the Catholic Church, these are impressive works of art. The artist has produced a culturally relevant and modern work using black and white only, the colours of the clergy. Light falls over the white lattices giving depth of field and perspective.

Colin enjoyed his time in the church, but was unable to commit to the routine of formal worship, being I think determined to find his own way. This is something the Catholic Church, in its role as God's intermediary has tried to stamp out from time to time. So for Colin this was an exciting intellectual adventure amongst minds that he could relate to and who gave him the spiritual knowledge he was seeking. Later works like *The Lagoon Plankton* take on a new meaning when this is borne in mind. The expressive *Scared* series, rather than a cry for help, becomes the voice of a confident man who knows where he is going.

## DEVOTIONS UNLIMITED

WYSTAN CURNØW, NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, 11 ØCTØBER 1975

One reviewer wrote: "The inequalities and paradoxes of Colin McCahon's art are displayed as never before in his exhibition at Barry Lett Galleries." The landscape "mural commissioned for the Urewera National Park headquarters is a magnificent work". As for the rest, he wrote as follows: "It is hard to find sense, meaning, or any artistic merit in these paintings at all". Now I've heard this story before. The one that goes: (1) McCahon is an erratic genius. (2) When he shows work I understand (landscapes mostly) he's magnificent. (3) When he shows works I don't understand (abstractions more or less) he's having another of his off-days. (4) When he shows both sorts in one show I *know* he's an erratic genius.

I find no inequalities here. You might have known McCahon could paint such a mural. But you would not have known he could produce the three sets called *Teaching Aids*. They surprise, and that to me is the difference. McCahon is best when he surprises. Mind you, if it's meaning you want you'll find it first in what is familiar. The two earlier series called *Numerals* (1958, 1965), for instance. And the numbers one to 14? They're obviously the Stations of the Cross. The stations first appeared in the 1940s, and all 14 are represented in landscape-type series of 1966 and 1974. *Teaching Aids* fuse these two favourite subjects. They reveal a task set by past painting and performed by the present artist.

You read things into these paintings. The stations are events in the journey to Calvary. In church it's a devotional exercise to move, in order, from one to another and to pause before each in meditation and prayer. Here the painter performs the exercise 10 times in each set, and we follow him. Each time the story has a different emphasis. Panels one and two of the first set only take us up to the second fall. In the sixth, the last station (the burial) is literally buried in the centre. The last panel anticipates the resurrection, although that's not in the story. And so on. We realise then that there's no limit to our devotions.

You read things out of these paintings. There's just number here, after all. And lines. Numbers lead the eye around the composition by a fixed path, forcing it to "jump" the white grid at set points. But each path is different - there's no limit to the devotions we can make to seeing. Paintings about looking, then. Words, numbers, signs. Paintings about language. What about the juxtaposition of Roman and Arabic numerals in the third set? What about the panels looking like blackboards? There's really any God's amount of meaning here.

McCahon's art is impure. I mean to say that his art is a medley of symbolisms: religious, mathematical, linguistic, public and private, painterly and literary. His paintings are wilfully out of the mainstreams of contemporary art. No-one has painted pictures like his, no-one is likely to. Everything is staked on the power of the artistic personality to make these symbolisms cohere in the body of the work, the corpus. So there are no single works, but sets, series, and finally only one work, the life-work. McCahon would seem to obey these injunctions: it must be sacred, a matter of life and death. And he gains his power from them, as well as his modernity. Modernity is more a matter of sensibility than it is of forms. McCahon's forms are eccentric, his enterprise risky, but he remains the most ambitious and exciting painter we have.

Box 68401 Newton Auckland

October 9 - '75.

Dear Wynstan, Thanks for your review in the Listener.

It is the first & only serious comment I've had - there has been a deathly silence all around. you cheer me, I've been a bit sad about it, I thought I was saying something. Somebody bought the '3' series. I trust this as an act of faith & not commerce. I like to think he understood.

It doesn't matter, I got some fainting these ones & fainted beyond the stations because of my joy in being there and understanding more than I had yet known.

I don't think I have been rude to the Church. I fainted there for 'children' who could see and for myself needing better sight.

Thank you

Gretigo Colhi



**Colin McCahon in the Octagon.**

Dunedin, c.1939 Photograph courtesy of the Hocken Library, University of Otago

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Design Arch MacDonnell

Photography John McIver

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ISBN 0 86463 203 7

Colin McCahon was born in 1919 in Timaru, the son of Ethel and John McCahon. He was educated in Dunedin and attended King Edward Technical College Art School part-time. He began exhibiting paintings in 1939. In 1942 he married fellow painter Anne Hamblett and they went to live at Pangatotara, near Nelson. McCahon worked in tobacco fields and orchards and as a builder's labourer until 1948 when the family moved to Christchurch. They had four children, William, Catherine, Victoria and Matthew. Colin McCahon exhibited regularly in Christchurch while working as a gardener.

In May 1953 the family moved to Auckland and lived at French Bay in Titirangi. McCahon worked at the Auckland City Art Gallery, first as a cleaner, then temporary attendant. By 1956 he was Keeper of the Gallery and Deputy Director and organised many exhibitions of contemporary and historical art. While at the Gallery McCahon painted, exhibited, taught art classes at night and designed sets for the New Independent Theatre which produced plays by New Zealand writers.

In 1964 he joined the staff of the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland as lecturer in painting. He taught there until 1970 when, at the age of fifty-one, he was finally able to paint full-time.

In 1972 the Auckland City Art Gallery organised a large survey exhibition of McCahon's work which toured through New Zealand. In 1978 the New Zealand Government presented *Victory over Death 2* to the government and people of Australia. Early in 1983, **I will need words**, an exhibition curated by Wystan Curnow and organised by the National Art Gallery, was shown at the Fifth Biennale of Sydney. It later travelled to the 1984 Edinburgh Festival. By 1984 prolonged illness prevented Colin McCahon from painting and in 1987, on the 27th May, he died in Auckland.

**Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys**, a large thematic survey exhibition opened at the Auckland City Art Gallery in November 1988. It travelled through New Zealand and selections from the exhibition were subsequently shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

The NEW Gallery  
Auckland Art Gallery  
Cnr Wellesley & Lorne Sts  
New Zealand  
Phone 649 307 7700

