

02

CANDLES IN A DARK ROOM:

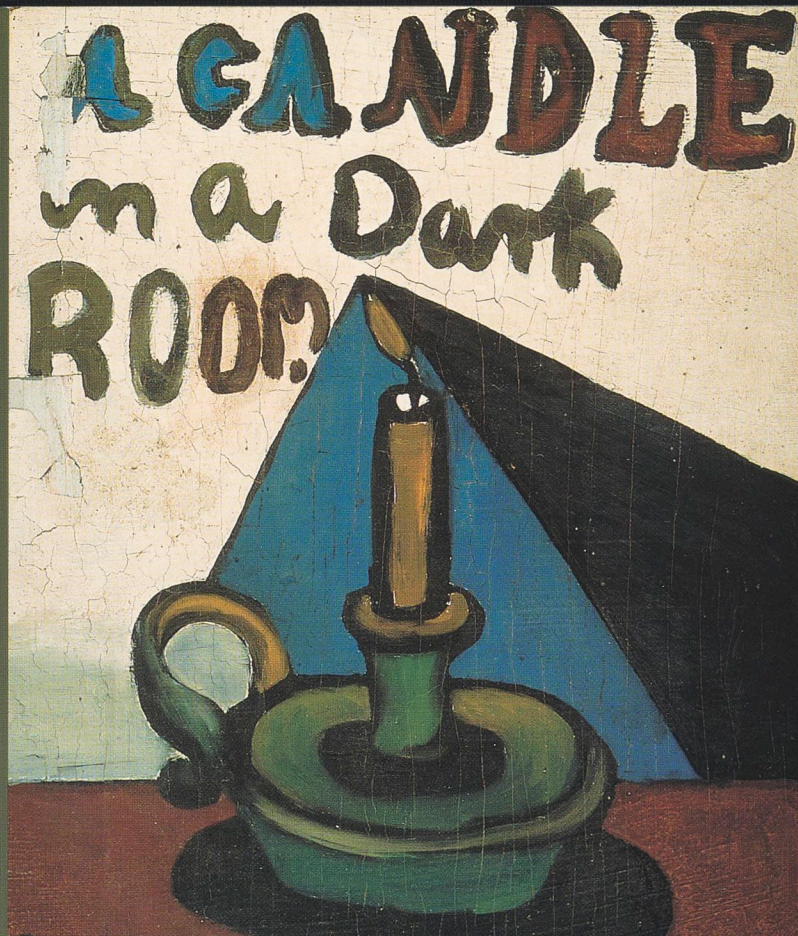
JAMES K. BAXTER AND COLIN McCAHON

JULY 1995 - OCTOBER 1996

The NEW Gallery

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

Colin McCahon (1919-87), as painter, and James K. Baxter (1926-72), as poet, were among the leading New Zealand artists of their generation. For three decades their paths criss-crossed and their careers were linked by background, friendship, mutual respect, and by broadly similar ideas about art, landscape, society, war, religion, politics, Maori culture, and New Zealand. This exhibition explores various phases in their personal relationship from 1943 when they first met to 1973, the year after Baxter died.



THE COLIN McCAHON ROOM

This exhibition honours the achievements of two towering figures in the cultural life of New Zealand. Colin McCahon and James K. Baxter have long been acknowledged as artists of outstanding importance, but the connections between them remained unexplored - until 1990, when Peter Simpson wrote the following in his Listener review of Frank McKay's *The Life of James K Baxter*. (Oxford University Press)

'How remarkable it is - and how little it has been remarked - that two of the major religious artists of the post-war period (and my reference is not confined to this country) should have emerged from virtually the same time and place: Dunedin, New Zealand in the 1940s. The parallels, both biographical and artistic are extraordinary: an Otago childhood; rebellion against the conformity of family, school and society; preoccupation with the theme of the land, the people and in particular the contrast between the natural and social order; assertion of a religious vision despite it being out of time and out of place in a materialistic, secular society; alcoholism; rejection of Protestantism for a personal form of Catholicism; an ever-growing commitment to the Maori perspective; an increasingly dark, death-centred pessimism - the list could be extended.'

Peter Simpson's essay in this booklet, and his careful selection and placement of paintings and poems in the exhibition, sharply illuminate the personal and the artistic connections between Baxter the poet and McCahon the painter. This exhibition breaks new ground in scholarship about both McCahon and Baxter and we are grateful to Professor Simpson for contributing his considerable insights to the McCahon Room exhibition programme.

Thanks to all the lenders to the exhibition, especially Mrs J. C. Baxter; the Hocken Library, University of Otago; the Manawatu Art Gallery; the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, the Rotorua Museum and Art Gallery and to Peter McLeavey for his assistance. As always the Gallery is grateful to the McCahon family.

Finally, it gives the Gallery great pleasure to announce that Ernst & Young, consistent supporters of the Auckland Art Gallery, have become sponsors of the McCahon Room's exhibitions and publications. This generosity will ensure that the McCahon Room's programme will continue to reveal new insights into the work of one of New Zealand's most important artists.

Alexa M. Johnston
Principal Curator

CANDLES IN A DARK ROOM: JAMES K. BAXTER AND COLIN McCAHON

AN ESSAY BY PETER SIMPSON

Colin McCahon (1919-87), as painter, and James K. Baxter (1926-72), as poet, were among the leading New Zealand artists of their generation. For three decades their paths criss-crossed and their careers were linked by background, friendship, mutual respect, and by broadly similar ideas about art, landscape, society, war, religion, politics, Maori culture, and New Zealand. This exhibition explores various phases in their personal relationship from 1943 when they first met to 1973, the year after Baxter died. Also, it investigates significant affinities in their artistic practice and points implicitly to certain truths about New Zealand culture implied by such striking parallels between two highly individualistic artists working in different art forms.¹

I. BEGINNINGS Baxter and McCahon both grew up in Dunedin, and the landscapes and culture of Otago were crucially formative of their artistic outlook. They committed themselves early to an artistic vocation; for both there was only one direction². McCahon completed his first major painting *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill* when he was 20, while Baxter published his first book *Beyond the Palisade* when he was just 18. Poems such as 'The Mountains' show that, like the somewhat older painter, Baxter forged his artistic identity largely through identification with the Otago landscape.

They first met in 1943, during World War Two, when McCahon, then 24, visited the Baxter home in Brighton, south of Dunedin, probably to talk with James' pacifist father, Archibald.³ But it was his meeting with the 17-year-old school-boy which apparently made more impact on the painter. In response he painted **A Candle in a Dark Room**. The identification of this work with the poet (first reported by Gordon Brown⁴) is confirmed by a letter written by McCahon after Baxter's death: 'I've just unearthed one painted years ago called **A Candle in a Dark Room** I painted about Jim Baxter. It too is a portrait of a time and place. . .'⁵ Not of course a portrait in the conventional sense, this still life depicts a lighted candle which throws a dark, triangular shadow. The title occupies much of the painting, anticipating the prominence later accorded titles and words in McCahon's work. Such foregrounding of 'the word' refers implicitly to Baxter's identity as poet. The candle is identified with the poet, drawing on the traditional Romantic symbolism of the artist as a source of illumination.

⊕ LANDS SEEN IN THE LIGHT ⊕ OF AN INHUMAN DAWN

O lands seen in the light of an inhuman dawn

Lands of first-seeming dream now of surrealist night-mare

Why do you so destroy my isolation

With the weight of an earlier and prehistoric isolation?

Why do you gaze into my lamp-lit solitude

With stone eyes O nearing mountains stone-crested

Murmuring madness - learning and silted Druid monoliths

To kindred listening with secretive insane attention?

And rivers leaping with immense inertia past gorge and derrick

Why do you speak from your opaque blindness

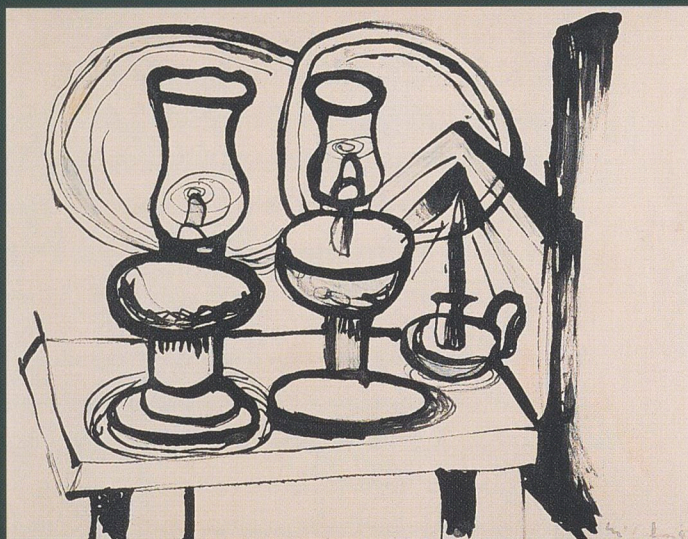
Not of life not of snow but a swollen barsbness

Showing an eye-universe inanely innately blind?

Even so are men. O for the flood of compassion

Of emotional understanding and human blunder.

1942



Beyond the Palisade, Caxton Press, 1944

Still life with lamps 1947 brush drawing 200x258mm
Auckland Art Gallery, purchased 1974

The 'dark room' presumably refers to the war-darkened world. McCahon, impressed by Baxter's precocious talent, evidently perceived him as a ray of light in the darkness, a symbol of the visionary artist. Similar imagery is also discernible in Baxter's early poems, as in the title poem of *Beyond the Palisade*: 'My soul as censer clear/In a translucent breast/Shall burn...' (CP, 4), and in 'O lands seen in the light of an inhuman dawn'.⁶

Later McCahon expanded this symbolism to include light bulbs (**The Lamp in My Studio**) and kerosene lamps. In the drawing **Still Life with Lamps**, both lamps and a candle are depicted. At times the symbolism is explicitly Christian, the lamp being identified with Jesus as 'the light of the world' in, for example, **Crucifixion (for Rodney Kennedy)** or **Christ as a Lamp**, at others it suggests the light of artistic imagination, as in **The Eagle** - a possible self-portrait - while in **The Promised Land** religious and artistic connotations are fused. Like William Blake, McCahon appeared at times to identify Jesus with the human imagination.⁷

2. CHRISTCHURCH 1948 Through most of 1948 McCahon and Baxter were both living in Christchurch, McCahon having moved there from Nelson, Baxter from Dunedin, and their friendship flourished. Baxter visited McCahon's studio behind the painter Doris Lusk's house and saw various paintings in progress.⁸ They also met in the bar of the United Services Hotel in Cathedral Square where, reputedly, McCahon occasionally showed new paintings (including **The Blessed Virgin Compared to a Jug of Pure Water and the Infant Jesus to a Lamp**, 1948), and Baxter recited poems from notebooks, including 'To My Father' and 'Poem by the Clock Tower, Sumner'.⁹

Artistically, 1948 was a significant year for both men. McCahon held his first important solo shows in Wellington (February) and Dunedin (September), and contributed to the Christchurch Group shows in November 1947 and 1948, exhibiting mainly landscapes and paintings of biblical scenes. These bold and innovative works were controversial, being described by one writer as 'pretentious hocus' which 'might pass as grafitti on the walls of some celestial lavatory ... but that is about all'.¹⁰ Such attacks provoked Baxter to a spirited defence of his friend's work in the student newspaper, *Canta*. McCahon's landscapes, he wrote, captured 'the raw harsh quality of so many New Zealand ranges', while the 'raw quality of his crucifixions' expressed 'the sour and struggling piety that lies behind the blank mask of Presbyterianism'.¹¹

As for Baxter, his second book *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* (Caxton Press, 1948), including such accomplished poems as 'The Cave' and 'High Country Weather', confirmed his outstanding promise. In *Landfall* Allen Curnow called Baxter 'the most original of New Zealand poets now living', and, coincidentally echoing McCahon's imagery, wrote: 'The flame dazzles

momentarily, sputters, then blazes again, like an arc lamp...'.¹² In November Baxter was baptised as an Anglican, starting the journey which eventually led him to Catholicism. Soon afterwards he married Jacqueline Sturm and moved to Wellington.¹³

When the Baxters' daughter, Hilary, was born the McCahons became her godparents, a relationship later sealed with the gift of one of the last of the figurative biblical paintings, **Mary and Jesus (there is only one direction)**. Baxter reciprocated with a poem 'To Colin McCahon', alluding to the imagery of this and other paintings.¹⁴

3. PASSAGES: 1950S AND 1960S The personal relationship was sustained intermittently during the years when the Baxters lived in Wellington and the McCahons (after 1953) in Auckland. There are many interesting parallels in their artistic development during the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1958 both McCahon and Baxter had overseas trips which impacted sharply on their art. A visit to the United States led to a major expansion of the scale and diversity of McCahon's painting; the **Elias** paintings, the **Northland Panels**, and the abstract **Gate** series were among the immediate products of this experience. In the same year Baxter went to India. In Howrah Bridge he remarked: 'the first part was written . . . by a man who thought he was a New Zealander; the second part lately . . . by a man who had become, almost unawares, a member of a bigger, rougher family. The poems written in India mark this change'.¹⁵

Another parallel was their mutual interest in Maori culture, partly due to personal circumstances. Jacqueline Baxter was Maori and McCahon's daughter Victoria's marriage to a Maori, gave Colin part-Maori grandchildren.¹⁶ Also, hostility to bourgeois values led both artists to turn increasingly to Maoritanga as an alternative to the materialism and secularism of Pakeha culture. Allusions to Maori language, design motifs, material culture, myths, and historical figures became increasingly prominent in their work from the late 1950s, as in, for example, Baxter's 'The Maori Jesus' (CP. 347) and McCahon's **The Two Prophets Te Ua and Te Whiti**.

A further parallel was their involvement in Roman Catholicism. Both artists rejected the puritanical protestantism of their upbringing and were attracted to the rituals and symbology of Catholicism. Baxter became a Catholic in 1958, while McCahon - though remaining outside the Church - completed a number of commissions for Catholic churches in the mid-1960s and adopted elements of Catholic iconography in his paintings; the motif of the 14 Stations of the Cross, in particular, became the basis of many later series.¹⁷

SONG FOR AN OLD SOAK

*For why should I remember
The unimagined good
The promise of September
The bird song in the wood,
When these have passed me by
Like morning from the sky.*

*Before the winter ditches
Grew old as charity,
The little strolling bitches
Would turn and smile at me
For the eyes of devil-may-care
And the curling of coal-hair.*

*The face in the mirror changes
Changes and grows old:
It's farewell to the ranges
And the upland rivers cold
Where I was herding sheep
In a world as wide as sleep.*

*As many brave ships founder
Upon the Goodwin Sands
(Or a belly that grows rounder)
And perish with all hands,
So in the same pit lie
Love, grief and memory.*

*Jesus and Mary, make
The springtime come again
Somewhere sometime, or take
The burden of my pain.
I seek the green inn
Where life and death begin.*

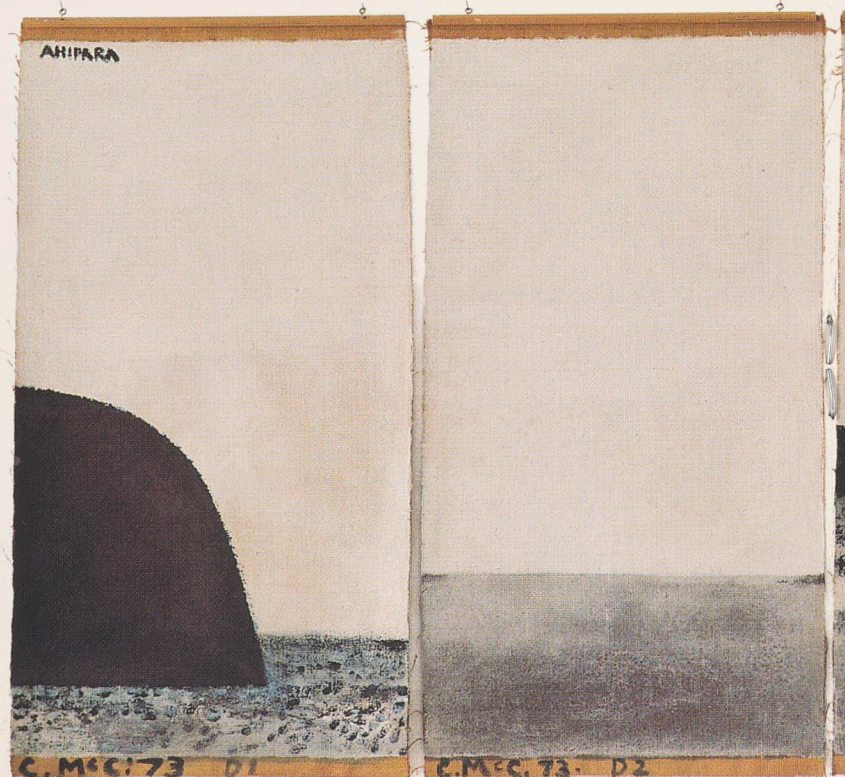
1946-48



The Fallen House, Caxton Press, 1953

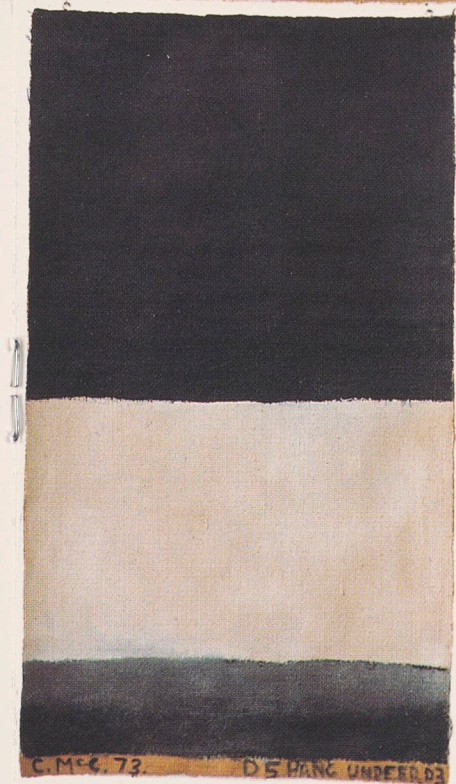
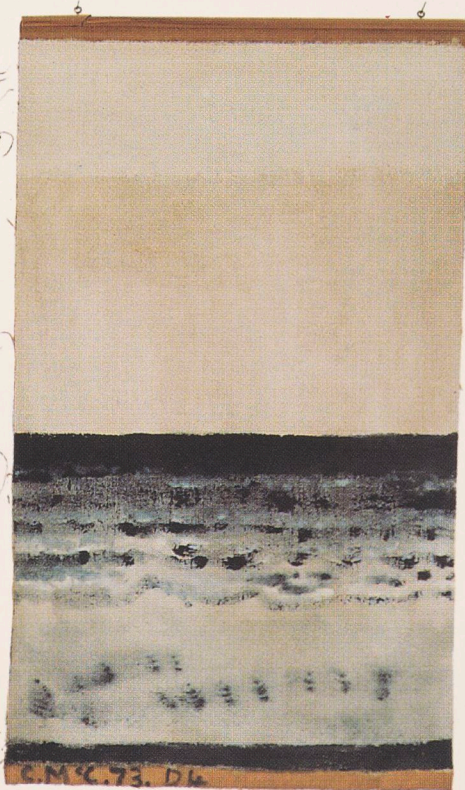
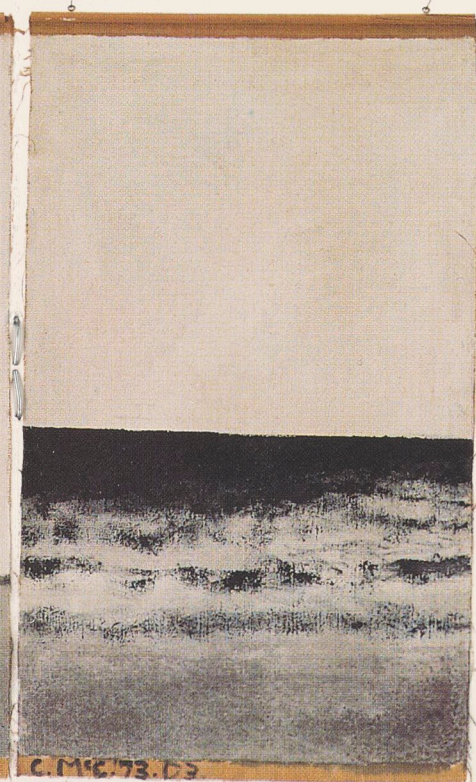
Mary and Jesus (there is only one direction) 1952 oil on board 702x564mm
Collection of Mrs J.C.Baxter and John Baxter, Wellington

Beach Walk Series D (Ahipara) 1973 acrylic on canvas
3000x2240mm Private collection, Wellington



From the mid-1960s Baxter and McCahon each drew renewed sustenance from revisiting the landscapes of their youth. Baxter spent 1966-67 as Burns Fellow at the University of Otago which led to dozens of poems about Otago locations. Similarly, McCahon produced several series based on return visits to the South Island, including the **North Otago Landscapes** of 1967. In both cases the new work was notably simple and austere, and implies a critique of their earlier more elaborate manner.¹⁸

4. ENDINGS In his last years Baxter enacted his increasingly radical Christianity by embracing poverty, going barefoot, and repudiating the trappings of bourgeois society. Eventually he gathered a 'tribe' of the disaffected young around him in the tiny settlement of Jerusalem (Hiruharama) on the Whanganui River. He considered the fusion of Catholicism and Maoritanga in Jerusalem a living embodiment of his philosophy. The progress of his experiment in 'learning from the Maori side of the fence' is recorded in his last books *Jerusalem Sonnets*, *Jerusalem Daybook* and *Autumn Testament*.¹⁹



Meanwhile, from 1964 until 1970 McCahon taught at the School of Art in the University of Auckland, an institution which Baxter associated with the mainstream societal values he despised. This led to some tension and conflict in the relations of the two old friends, as is suggested by a passage in Baxter's last poem 'Ode to Auckland':

*The Auckland Art School gives me a pain in both my testicles.
They don't know the best of Illingworth.
They admire the worst of McCahon.
Why not burn the art school down
And get some old houses and do a bit of painting
Either with a brush on the ceiling
Or with a brush on a bit of canvas? (CP, 599)²⁰*

When Baxter died suddenly in October 1972 the two were still unreconciled and this had a profound effect on McCahon. Throughout 1973 he threw himself into several memorial projects, possibly in an attempt to assuage the guilt he felt about their falling out.²¹ The first was a festival of Baxter plays at Victoria University, Wellington in May 1973 for which McCahon designed sets and a poster, and produced drawings for the programme covers.²² He wrote: '[Baxter] and I seem to have had a few battles over the years, now I so much respect him . . . I may not be allowed to get away with the nakedness I feel essential.'²³

Later McCahon made several series of paintings focussing on Baxter's memory. Known collectively as **Beach Walk**, two series (A and B) were exhibited - along with 14 drawings called **Jet Out from Muriwai** - at the Barry Lett Gallery in Auckland in August, while **Series C (Walk)** and **D** were shown at the Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington in September, 1973.²⁴ Of the former McCahon wrote: 'The Lett gallery looked cold as the grave, but beautiful. I was talking about J.K.B. and not feeling like Spring Time coming'.²⁵ And in a statement for the Wellington show he wrote: ' . . . they are just bits of a place I love and painted in memory of a friend who now - in spirit - has walked this same beach. The intention is not realist but an abstraction of the final walk up the beach. The Christian "walk" and the Maori "walk" have a lot in common'.²⁶

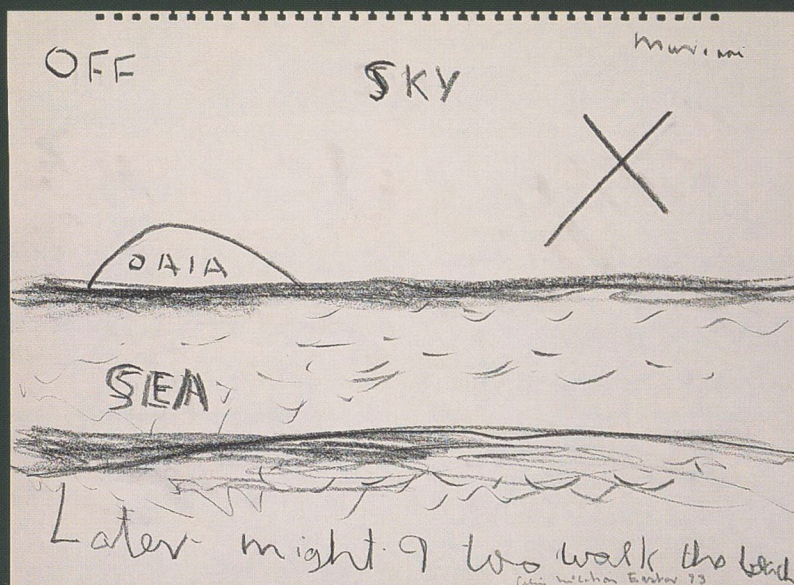
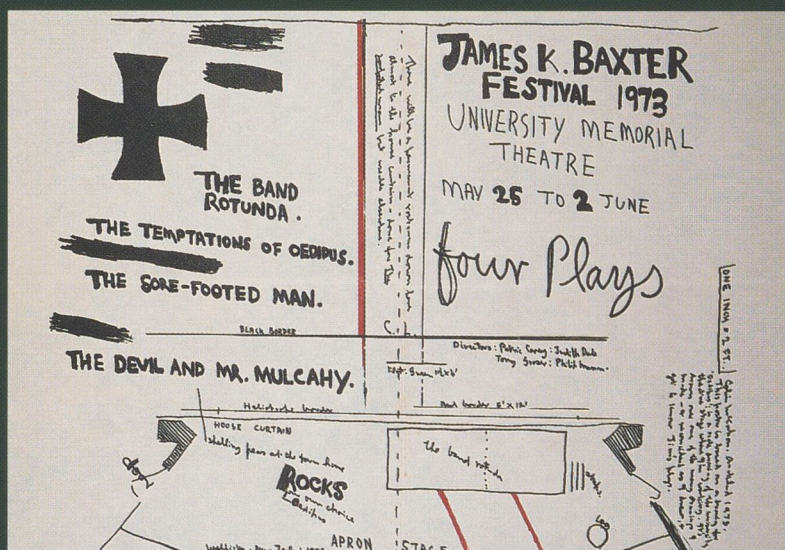
These paintings are winter landscapes of sea, sky, beach and mist, mostly relating to Muriwai near Auckland where McCahon had a studio. Most also refer to the 14 Stations of the Cross; **Series A** consists of 14 separate canvases while **Series C (Walk)** consists of 11 panels divided into 14 numbered parts.²⁷ They also allude to the Maori belief in the passage of the soul after death along the northern beaches to the leaping off point at Cape Reinga; a related painting given to Baxter's family after his death has the title **Jim Passes the Northern beaches**.²⁸

These drastically simple yet sublime paintings in their fusion of personal, Christian and Maori elements, achieve the kind of ostensibly artless roughness and nakedness for which Baxter had called and which his own last poems eloquently display. They constitute a fitting conclusion to the journey which began 30 years earlier when a 24-year old painter met a 17-year old poet and painted **A Candle in a Dark Room**, a title which is just as suitably applied to the painter - who has himself since walked the same beach - as to the poet who inspired it.²⁹

Peter Simpson is Associate Professor of English and Co-ordinator of New Zealand Studies at the University of Auckland.

Poster for James K. Baxter Festival 1973 colour lithograph 400x570mm
Auckland Art Gallery, purchased 1988

Untitled, Easter 1973 charcoal drawing 270x372mm
McCahon family collection





HAERE RA

*Farewell to Hirubarama-
The green hills and the river fog
Cradling the convent and the Maori houses -

The peach tree at my door is broken, sister,
It carried too much fruit,
It hangs now by a bent strip of bark -*

*But better that way than the grey moss
Cloaking the branch like an old man's beard;
We are broken by the Love of the Many

And then we are at peace
Like the fog, like the river, like a roofless house
That lets the sun stream in because it cannot help it.*

1969

Collected Poems, Oxford University Press, 1979

Jim passes the Northern beaches 1972 oil on unstretched canvas
445x435mm Collection of Mrs J.C. Baxter, Wellington

ENDNOTES

- 1 For further details see Peter Simpson, 'Candles in a Dark Room: James K. Baxter and Colin McCahon', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, v. 13, 1996
- 2 This phrase adapts the title of McCahon, *Mary and Jesus (there is only one direction)*, see, p. 6
- 3 Archibald Baxter became a hero to pacifists after the publication of *We Shall Not Cease* (London, Gollancz, 1939), a harrowing account of his treatment as a conscientious objector in World War One
- 4 Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Wellington, Reed, 1984), p. 30
- 5 Colin McCahon to Malcolm Ross, 27 March 1973 (Hocken Library), see below, p. 14
- 6 Quotations from James K. Baxter, *Collected Poems* (Wellington, OUP, 1979) are printed with the kind permission of Mrs J. C. Baxter and Oxford University Press: page numbers are given in brackets
- 7 Baxter compared McCahon to Blake in 'Salvation Army Aesthete?', *Canta*, 21 July, 1948, p. 4
- 8 'His latest work, so far unfinished, shows a growing strength and richness', *ibid*: see below p.13
- 9 See Bill Pearson, 'James K. Baxter: A Personal Memory' in *Islands* 3 (Autumn 1973), pp. 2-5 and W.H. Oliver, James K. Baxter: A Portrait (Wellington, Port Nicholson Press, 1983), p. 51
- 10 A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Painting in Canterbury', *Landfall* 5 (March 1948), pp. 49-50.
- 11 'Salvation Army Aesthete?', *op. cit.*
- 12 Allen Curnow, review of *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness*, *Landfall* 8 (September 1948), pp. 230-31
- 13 For further details see Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter* (Auckland, OUP, 1990), pp. 100-119; letters from Baxter to McCahon are quoted in Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-47
- 14 The manuscript of this poem is in Baxter's papers in the Hocken Library, Dunedin
- 15 Note on the dust-jacket of James K. Baxter, *Howrah Bridge and other poems* (London, OUP, 1961)
- 16 See Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 157. In a letter of April 17, 1973 (Turnbull Library) McCahon said of his drawings for the Baxter Plays Festival in Wellington: 'The programme cover has two drawings on it - front 2 candles and a cross - back a small Maori boy - looks very like my own little grandson Tui'
- 17 See, e.g., *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, acrylic on paper, 1966 (Auckland Art Gallery)
- 18 Compare, e.g. North Otago Landscape 4, 1967 (Auckland Art Gallery) with *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill*, 1939, or Baxter's 'At Kuri Bush' (1966, CP, 370) with 'To My Father' (1947, CP, 65)
- 19 *Jerusalem Sonnets* (Dunedin, University of Otago, 1970), *Jerusalem Daybook* (Wellington, Price Milburn, 1971), *Autumn Testament* (Wellington, Price Milburn, 1972): 'to learn from the Maori side of the fence' was written by Baxter in the poet Kendrick Smithyman's copy of *Jerusalem Sonnets*
- 20 Michael Illingworth (1932-88) was a painter friend of Baxter's
- 21 See Gordon Brown in *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20
- 22 The plays were *The Temptations of Oedipus*, *The Devil and Mr. Mulcahy*, *The Band Rotunda* and *The Sore-Footed Man*; the programme cover drawing refers back to the imagery of *A Candle in a Dark Room*; the poster (see below, p. 10) was based on McCahon's set design
- 23 Letter to Malcolm Ross, 27 March 1973, *op. cit.*, see p. 14
- 24 See Tony Green, 'Colin McCahon's Necessary Protection in Auckland', *Art New Zealand* 11 (Spring 1978), pp. 32-35
- 25 Quoted in Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 174
- 26 See Green, *op. cit.*, p. 32; one drawing (see p. 10) is inscribed 'Later might I too walk the beach'
- 27 *Series B* consists of 2 separate works, *Series D* consists of five panels (see pp. 7-8)
- 28 See, p. 11
- 29 I wish to thank Mrs J.C. Baxter, Don Binney, Gordon Brown, Lawrence Jones, William McCahon, Bill Pearson, C.K. Stead, the staff of Auckland Art Gallery, Hocken Library, Alexander Turnbull Library, and private lenders for their generous assistance with this project

LIST OF WORKS

PAINTINGS BY COLIN MCCAHON

- Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill** 1939 oil on board 760x1345mm
Hocken Library, Dunedin. John and Ethel McCahon Bequest, 1973
- A Candle in a Dark Room** 1943 oil on board 380x310mm
McCahon family collection
- Crucifixion (for Rodney Kennedy)** 1947 oil on cheesecloth on board 746x536mm
Private collection, Auckland
- Still-life with lamps** 1947 brush drawing 200x258mm
Auckland Art Gallery, purchased 1974
- Christ as a lamp** c1947 oil on board 648x520mm
McCahon family collection
- The Eagle** 1950 oil on cardboard 635x507mm
McCahon family collection
- Takaka landscape** 1948 oil on jute canvas 895x1110mm
Private collection, Auckland
- The Marys at the tomb** 1950 oil on canvas on board 806x1054mm
Auckland Art Gallery, presented by the Friends of the Gallery, 1960
- Mary and Jesus (there is only one direction)** 1952 oil on board 702x564mm
Collection of Mrs J.C. Baxter and John Baxter, Wellington
- The two prophets, Te Ua and Te Whiti** 1972 acrylic and watercolour on paper 730x 1095mm.
Private collection, Auckland
- Jim passes the Northern beaches** 1972 oil on unstretched canvas 445x435mm
Collection of Mrs J.C. Baxter, Wellington
- Beach walk A14** 1973 acrylic on jute canvas 925 x530mm
Private collection, Auckland
- Beach walk B1** 1973 acrylic on jute canvas 915x2210mm
Private collection, Auckland
- Beach Walk Series D (Ahipara)** 1973 acrylic on canvas 3000x2240mm
Private collection, Wellington
- Untitled, Easter** 1973 charcoal drawing 270x372mm
McCahon family collection

POEMS BY JAMES K. BAXTER

- 'The Mountains' 1942, 'O lands seen in the light of an inhuman dawn', 1942, 'Eagle' 1937-43
Beyond the Palisade, Caxton Press, Christchurch, 1944
- 'The Cave' 1948 *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness*, Caxton Press, Christchurch, 1948
- 'Poem by the Clock Tower, Sumner' 1948, 'Song for an Old Soak' 1946-48
The Fallen House, Caxton Press, Christchurch, 1953
- 'To Colin McCahon' c1952 unpublished
- 'At Hokianga' 1957, *In Fires of No Return*, Oxford University Press, London, 1958
- 'At Kuri Bush' 1966, *Runes*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973
- 'The Maori Jesus' 1966, 'Haere Ra', 1969 *Collected Poems*, Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1979
- 'The Dark Welcome' from 'Five Sestinas' 1972, *The Labyrinth*, Oxford University Press, Wellington, 1974
- 'The Ikons' 1971, *Jerusalem Daybook*, Price Milburn, Wellington, 1971

PHOTOGRAPHS

- Theo Schoon (1915-1985)
Portrait of Colin McCahon, December 1948 gelatin silver print 100mmx70mm
McCahon family collection
- Portrait of James K. Baxter c1943 gelatin silver print 348x275mm
Collection of the the Rotorua Museum and Art Gallery
- Michael de Hamel
Portrait of James K. Baxter c1971 350x276mm
Courtesy of the artist

Salvation Army Aesthete?...

The painting of Colin McCahon has lately aroused considerable controversy in the Listener. His critics seem to be divided into two camps - those who regard his work as being on a par with bad posters and those who regard it as being original and naive though technically limited. We do not claim expert judgment in matters of art, but we have seen McCahon's work develop over several years and have found that what jarred at first became on closer acquaintance deeply moving and impressive. Knowing that for most critics, opinions and prejudice are the same thing, we have gathered by means of casual conversation from three well-known artists their opinion of McCahon. All three were agreed that McCahon's work possessed power, depth and beauty; one ranked him as the most vital artist now painting in New Zealand. Hence it is difficult to dismiss him as a poseur and eccentric.

Colin McCahon was born in Timaru of pure Irish descent. Till 1938 he lived in Dunedin. He is now in Christchurch, and is making a livelihood by helping to produce miniatures and jewellery, thus supporting a wife and three children. He endured three half-years at the School of Art; has worked as a builder, also in innumerable labouring jobs, the most reputable being that of the ladies lavatory attendant and swan-feeder in Wellington. On meeting McCahon one is struck by his obvious sincerity and admirable sense of humour. Referring to the difficulty that many find in placing his work, he remarked on one occasion that it is exactly the same kind of thing as one sees outside the Salvation Army Citadel.

The print shown above is one of his typical landscapes. It captures the raw harsh quality of so many New Zealand ranges, and should be an introduction to some of his more complex work. This print has appeared with others in "Landfall", but McCahon's vigorous use of colour cannot be shown. Nevertheless the rhythmic form of his art should be apparent even in black and white.

There seem to be three main difficulties found in the appreciation of McCahon. The first springs probably from an ignorance of his cultural background. There is much truth in the saying that there is nothing new under the sun. To those familiar with Bosch's "Temptation of St Anthony", surrealism will not seem strange. And as John Summers points out in his penetrating essay in "Student", McCahon's paintings would have been quite intelligible to those who saw Fra Angelico at work. Unconsciously we reject the major part of our artistic heritage for a norm founded on the chocolate box or that photographic mirroring of nature which reaches its peak in Albrecht Durer. A fruitful comparison

can be drawn between McCahon's religious paintings and those of Blake. Both develop their own theme rather than illustrating a text; and both ally confidence and daring to a sure instinct. It would be untrue to describe McCahon's painting as "mystical"—there is nothing woolly about his method, and the device borrowed from the cartoon brings it nearer to satire.

The second difficulty is implied by the first, and rises from a misconception of the function of art. Many of us in our heart of hearts wish only to see a coloured photograph and distrust all symbolism and subjectivism. And the same problem is encountered in the literary field. Modern novels tend to be little more than accurate reporting. Jung relates how he showed a photograph to a Melanesian savage. The head-hunter turned it in his hands for some time and then exclaimed with an air of profound discovery, "It is a picture of white men." An European child would have recognised it instantly. Yet the savage was capable of creating the most subtle and expressive art forms, including no doubt representation of the human figure. We are inclined to forget that naturalistic art is based on a convention just as much as impressionism. The apparent distortion of McCahon's painting is in fact more accurate than the photograph for it represents movement and solidity.

The third difficulty comes from his choice of subject and his handling of it. The raw quality of his crucifixions might well offend a church-goer who wished to forget Christ on weekdays. There is in them a good deal of pity and terror and the monstrously ludicrous element which lies in all suffering. This may seem to a Christian blasphemy and to a non-Christian morbidity. But McCahon has done in painting what Sargeson does tentatively in prose before he cuts himself short with a sneer. He is expressing the sour and struggling piety that lies behind the blank mask or Presbyterianism. Instead of revolting from his environment he learns to accept it. His Christs and angels are reconciled with the fertile hills behind them. The curve of the wing of the Angel of the Annunciation is repeated in the shape of the peak above the square house.

The art of Colin McCahon has a fire and originality which sets it apart from that of most New Zealand painters. A. R. D. Fairburn is perhaps in some of his bush paintings the nearest to him in method and feeling. It is explorative and by standing outside schools is able to draw on the technical approach of any of them. His latest work, so far unfinished, shows a growing strength and richness. The man himself possesses great honesty and integrity, qualities which in combination with his undoubted gifts, should assure his work of the recognition it deserves.

—J.K.B.

all the people in my paintings
are friends. all the paintings are about friends
the just unearthed one painted years ago called
a candle in a dark room' I painted about Jim B.
It too is a portrait of a time & place (about 47'
I have recently painted an end to that beginning
for Hilary when her father died called 'Jim too
walks the Northern Beaches'. I know it's very beautiful
Hilary has too a work painted to mark her
beginning, a Virgin & child exhibited in Christchurch
sometime & reported in the press oddly enough as
as ~~the~~ showing the Virgin & the child Jesus as Jews.
This I thought odd. What a beautiful essay
in the last 'Islands' on Baxter by Carl Stead. He
& I seem to have had a few battles over the years,
now I so much respect him. Am setting 4 Baxter
plays - Wellington, Victoria, end of may, & have had
to get struck in reading, over & over, & he become
most involved & Stead confirmed all my feelings. I
set the show & still have to do battle with the
show directors. I may not be allowed to get away
with the nakedness I feel essential. I'll fight for
it.



Colin McCahon, the Octagon,
Dunedin, c1939 Photograph
courtesy of the Hocken Library,
University of Otago

COLIN MCCAHON

Colin McCahon was born in Timaru in 1919, the son of Ethel and John McCahon. He began exhibiting paintings in 1939 and in 1942 he married fellow painter Anne Hamblett. They had four children.

In May 1953 the family moved to Auckland where McCahon worked at the Auckland City Art Gallery, eventually becoming Deputy Director. While at the Gallery McCahon painted, exhibited, taught art classes at night and designed sets for New Zealand plays at the New Independent Theatre. In 1958 he visited America on a Carnegie Institute Grant. He lectured in painting at the Elam School of Fine Arts from 1964 until 1970, when he was finally able to paint full time.

In 1972 the Auckland City Art Gallery organised a survey exhibition of his work which toured New Zealand. In 1978 the New Zealand Government presented **Victory over Death 2** to the government and people of Australia. McCahon was honoured in the 1983 Fifth Biennale of Sydney with a solo exhibition - *I will need words*. He died in Auckland in 1987.

Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys opened at the Auckland City Art Gallery in November 1988. Selections from it were shown at the Australian National Gallery and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

JAMES K. BAXTER

James K. Baxter was born in Dunedin in 1926, the son of Millicent and Archibald Baxter. He began writing poetry as a child and wrote prolifically all his life, also publishing plays and criticism. He married Jacqueline Sturm in 1948 and they had two children.

Brought up a Quaker, he became an Anglican in 1948 and a Roman Catholic in 1958. He worked in Wellington as a school teacher, editor for School Publications and postman, and was prominent in the Wellington literary scene. In 1958 he visited India for UNESCO, and he was Burns Fellow at the University of Otago in 1966-67.

In his last years he became a kind of itinerant, bare-footed counsellor, working among drop-outs and addicts in Wellington and Auckland. He also established a retreat at Jerusalem (Hiruharama) on the Whanganui River which demonstrated a fusion of Christian and Maori values - spiritual, collectivist, and anti-materialist. There hundreds of the disaffected young sought him out.

He died in Auckland in October 1972 and his tangi at Jerusalem attracted national publicity. His posthumous *Collected Poems*, ed. J. E. Weir (Oxford University Press, 1979) runs to more than 650 pages.



James K. Baxter, Cathedral Square,
Christchurch, 1948
Photograph courtesy of
Mrs J.C.Baxter, Wellington



ERNST & YOUNG

©The author and the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki Design Arch MacDonnell Photography John McIver, Julia Brooke-White
'Salvation Army Aesthete?...' reprinted courtesy of Mrs J.C. Baxter.

All poems by James K. Baxter are reproduced with the permission of the Oxford University Press, and all paintings by Colin McCahon are reproduced with the permission of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust. ISBN 0 86463 214 2