

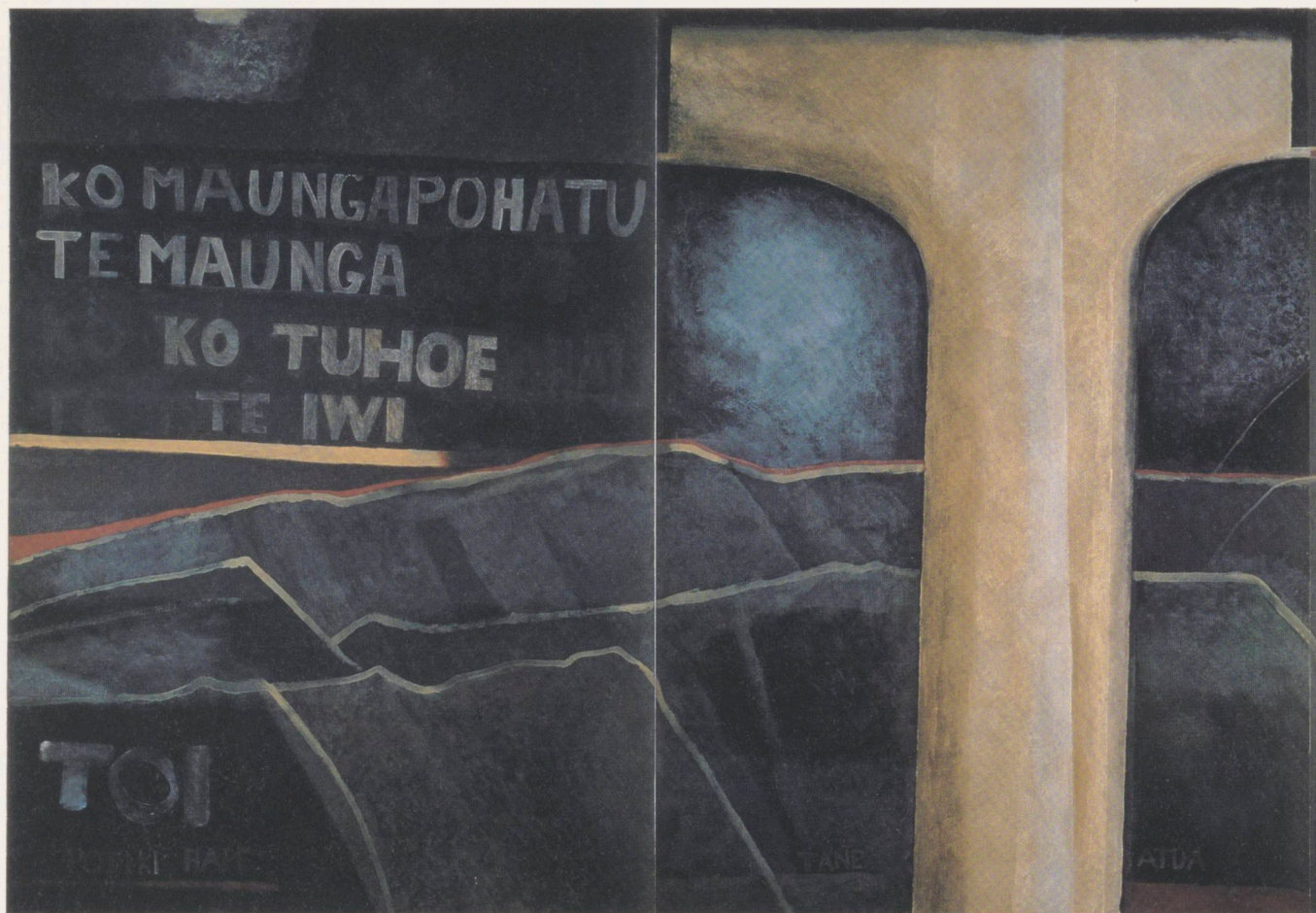
03 Urewera Mural

Colin McCahon

THE McCAHON ROOM

AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

McCahon



Colin McCahon, New Zealand, 1919 - 1987

Urewera Mural 1975

acrylic on unstretched canvas, 2550 x 5445mm

Collection of Department of Conservation,
Āniwaniwa Visitors Centre, Lake Waikaremoana



FOREWORD

As the object of a highly publicised political action — a theft — the history and meaning of Colin McCahon's *Urewera Mural* has been altered inexorably in the eyes of New Zealanders, Pākehā and Māori alike. We now see the painting as more highly charged, polarising a national debate on the politics or criminality of its taking. But do we know it more and understand it less?

While at one level the painting continues to speak powerfully about Tūhoe land, about Tūhoe's deep insertion into Te Urewera, at another, its theft spoke to "avenge the immorality of land confiscation". While the fate of the *Urewera Mural* was held in the balance, there was that pain that inevitably follows the loss of a taonga, a treasure.

It is frequently work of precisely this kind - a heroic stand across the divide of belief systems, relentless in its want of knowledge and understanding — which can provoke shift within a culture. In the hands of a great artist, such as McCahon, images like his *Urewera Mural* can be meeting places even as they remain contested. They help to define who and what we are.

This is not to defend either the manner or motivation behind the painting's theft and later return, through the agency of Gallery patron Jenny Gibbs, but to propose that these things must form part of its new significance.

For that reason this publication and the CD which accompanies it addresses the painting with many voices. What they reveal is that the recent saga of the *Urewera Mural*, despite its controversy, has helped us to locate new knowledge and to yield up new understanding. What we do with these has always been our challenge.

Chris Saines

Director

Urewera Mural, 1976

These three panels tell three stories of time, place and spirit. The painting is non-judgemental and it tells a visual short-hand history of the Tūhoe and their interaction with the land and spirit, as the artist Colin McCahon understood it.

The left-hand-side has a mihi from McCahon using the name of the primary human ancestors, Toi, Pōtiki and Hape, from whom the Tūhoe trace their ancestry. The artist invokes their sacred mountain, Maungapōhatu, and says who they are, *Ko Tūhoe Te Iwi*. In this land the visible effect of spirit is shown as reflected golden light from the waters of Waikaremoana, a Garden Of Eden. The red outline of the bushed ranges, which in the left panel mimics a graph which achieves stasis in the centre, before declining again on the right, is the blood line of their ancestry, giving the viewer the sense of the growth and history of Tūhoe Iwi.

The centre panel tells of spirit and the land and the two things that endure beyond the lives and aspirations of people. Tāne Atua, his feet holding up the sky can also be seen as the torso of Christ and Tāne's symbol, the tree. Tāne's feet are joined to the past and the present, showing both the diverse unity of spirituality and unity of time. Te Kooti and Rua are shown as extensions of spirit's expression in the present. On the left there is a band at the top that tells of genesis and night and day in McCahon's own symbolic language, giving unity and compressing spiritual time from Genesis to the present. Hidden in the black paint in the centre on either side of Tāne's figure is the inscription *Tāne Eho* — Tāne's beneficence is only a dribble. Tāne — spirit, is neglected and only loves as he is loved, a warning to both Māori and Pākehā.

The right hand panel represents the present and the shortest historical time span. Here the words "Rua, Te Kooti and Tūhoe the people" are inscribed in the underpaint possibly to symbolise them as larger in the past than now. The names of the two prophets of

the Tūhoe and the word *Tūhoe* are also highlighted in paint that is easy to see, showing that the concepts of the three are living things in the minds of the Tūhoe. Cries from the *hapū* are shown as rising up out of the Urewera's with diminished and separate voices calling out their genealogical claim to the ancestral lands that they have been driven from. The artist makes no concessions to anyone's sensibilities; it is an uncomfortable place for both Māori and European.

William McCahon

My Te Urewera

I was born in Ruatāhuna and like many of my relations and fellow Tūhoe, I have spent more years out of Te Urewera, than in it. However, Te Urewera is a constant companion of mine. It broods at the back of the *hinengaro* (thoughts) waiting for attention: it allures, bewitches, tantalises, yearns, and when it doesn't get its way, it throws a tantrum and makes demands which are so overwhelming that only a hasty trip back to Ruatāhuna, to Maungapōhatu or Ruātoki appeases it. Once fulfilled, it rests until it stirs once more. Only another return trip can cure its yearning.

These are the symptoms of *matemate-ā-one*, a concept that is peculiar to Tūhoe, a *mate* (sickness) that affects the state of the mind and the soul. Tūhoe have sourced this condition to their *kuia* (grandmother) Hinenuitēpō, goddess of immortality, keeper of the secret of death. She, who reprimanded her grand nephew Māui for demanding of her this secret with the words, *Ka whakamatea e au te tangata i te ao, i te pō, kia tangi ai koutou ki ō koutou mate, kia matemate-ā-one ai koutou ki a koutou*.

These words suggest that the death of someone is the rallying point for the reaffirmation of *matemate-ā-one* among the living, the renewal of kinship ties of friendship, of memories and history, and suggests a perpetual bond between the earth and the life of

the people, between Te Urewera and Tūhoe. It is beyond *aroha*. It is a primal response to and craving for a particular place: a relationship with one's forebears. A sense of timeless belonging, of blood within the earth, across the waves, and in the skies! Thus when I return to Te Urewera to satisfy this craving, I renew my *matemate-ā-one*, my commitment to the *whenua* of Te Urewera.

This is what my Te Urewera means to me. This primal sense of belonging and affinity with the land cannot be illustrated by McCahon's Te Urewera, which is devoid of those elements which are meaningful to me. *Nā nga atua a Te Urewera i hanga, ko tā Makāna, nā te ringa tangata i hanga. Me pēhea hoki e rite ai ki tā ngā atua?*

Pou Temara

Senior Lecturer Maori Studies Victoria University

1 N. Te Awekotuku in *Te Mata o Te Rākau a Tūhoe*, an unpublished MA thesis by R. Mātaamua, Victoria University, Wellington.

Urewera Mural and issues of intercultural identity

Cultures sharing a landscape, as do those of Māori and Pākehā, can at times be astonished when the procedures covering an apparently similar situation can differ markedly. Unanticipated reactions can create tensions often surprising or simply puzzling to the other party. Such differences nearly invalidated McCahon's *Urewera Mural* of its purpose.

During the 1970s many Pākehā shared a liberal attitude to things Māori, but while intending support, many Māori felt these intentions were tainted with condescension. Although McCahon's homage's and borrowing's from Māori date from 1962 and though this acquisition of symbols and phrases appeared to gain acceptance, as an expression of his vision of New Zealand, he too was not beyond this sympathetic pretence of understanding. And the cause? For McCahon the independence to seek out what best

suited his own artistic purpose was paramount. His determination reworked images and ideas into viable symbols, even if their use upset what was established "correctness". His approach was Western, free thinking, occasionally fallible.

Shortly after accepting the *Urewera Mural* commission McCahon sought to unravel "the mystery of Man in the Urewera". For McCahon research involved visual and written sources as well as personal interview. As a speaker of Māori his skills were rudimentary. He sought help grappling with "texts" and, when dissatisfied with a translation, would tease out another interpretation with Māori speakers. But in broaching the region's history he discounted certain nuances involving mana.

With the painting completed to McCahon's plans, the Park Board visited McCahon on 28 July 1975. John Rangihau, reading the painting's text, disputed a line. McCahon, taken back, agreed to the alteration. Later, on reflection, John Rangihau requested further changes. McCahon felt his artistic integrity threatened. A tussle of wills began; a dispute capable of an earlier solution had a marae situation prevailed, where the questioning of what can be openly shared about a tribe's history could have challenged, been responded to, then settled without undue offence.

Twenty three years have passed since a compromise made possible the completion of *Urewera Mural*. For some, Walters, McCahon and Frizzell have appropriated their indigenous property. To now claim this as theft has become lopsided when a new generation of Māori artists are exploiting both Western and their own imagery with appropriateness and ease. Such interchanges indicate a growing maturity, though some usages will occasionally prove disruptive. McCahon's use of tribal genealogies remains a case in point. Sensitive issues were exposed outside the usual properties of art, inadequately acknowledging the protocols of intercultural exchanges.

Gordon H. Brown

A writer on New Zealand Art History.

Is there a Relationship?

Let us revisit that cold dark night shrouded in mist and mystery, as Elsdon Best would have it. The night the *Urewera Mural* was scraped from the wall. Shortly afterwards, Tūhoe suffered yet again, homes were entered, occupants handcuffed, gates forced open, provocative defiant statements surfaced everywhere. Examine more closely the *Urewera Mural*. Is it time to move beyond that rhetoric, to begin to offer well-informed and fair discussion and analysis? Perhaps, just perhaps, the measure of the *Urewera Mural* can be credited with bringing the expressive metaphorical language of Tūhoe to this exhibition, if only for that reason.

Art is always in a period of development where its methods and creativity sometimes holds dominance over the truth. What is the truth about the *Urewera Mural*? Is it about a people's development and Tūhoe aspirations for greater autonomy? Is it about forging a relationship between McCahon and Tūhoe? Is it an expression of the past injustices by the Crown on Tūhoe yet to be resolved? Or is it merely about events which shaped McCahon's position in selecting well chosen visual narratives.

As with all creative work, it must be adequate for the demands of what it seeks to express. I believe that euphoric involvement with the subject is not sufficient to justify the making of a work. As for myself, I have primarily reacted to the *Urewera Mural* at an aesthetic and emotional levels because of the identification of Urewera. The name Urewera constitutes a genealogical imperative. The process of connecting ourselves with Urewera is through the expressive metaphorical language of Tūhoe. It enjoins an abiding belief in the importance of ancestors and cosmic, environmental and traditional lore. There is a talent for remembering here, a talent for expression, a talent that links the expression and the truth belonging to the individual, to the environment, and to the land.

I believe, however, McCahon's work does bring a measure of excitement to the craft of seeing. He has selected the most compelling colours and text to create a juxtaposition between Tūhoe autonomy and the power of the State. The potential of which I can only guess at. For all of that I am still unable to define the truth.

In producing this painting, McCahon may have even struggled as he himself came across the injustices of the State. Perhaps the *Urewera Mural* is the acquainted painter's statement and his contribution to allow past injustices to become visible. While there is now no doubt as to the existence of the *Urewera Mural*, much controversy has swirled around the Tūhoe intruders who dared to shove the message to the State. Fuelled by the media, the debate continues to rage around a national icon.

Nōku anō koia ko te wareware;

'Alas! for my forgetfulness'

Taiarahia Black

Senior Lecturer, Massey University

A Chart To Country

At its crudest level, the painting *Urewera Mural* is a placard, a wall scrawl of protest from the 1970s. Where it towers as a great painting, is in its working of the power and magic of art in ways that New Zealand has never experienced before. You are on the wrong track to understanding it though, if it is as a painting alone that you see it.

Urewera Mural's extraordinariness has something to do with its "smouldering beauty". It also has something to do with the saga of its forcible uplifting from Āniwaniwa and it's vanishing for 15 months. But the roots of its greatness lies in McCahon's belief that it was "right". His bringing of his mastery of the painting tradition, alongside his abiding, anxious love of country, turning a commissioned scene into a protest manifesto, that touches raw Aotearoa nerves about land and culture.

The National Park Board wanting McCahon to convey "the mystery of man in Te Urewera", sent him the Park Handbook, drawing his attention to the Māori history chapters. McCahon's unobtrusive graffiti-ed response — TŪHOE UREWERA THEIR LAND suggests that any mystery was more in why those who created the National Park and were now about to interpret it via a Visitors Centre. They couldn't see, what to McCahon was so obvious, that the umbilical coherence of land and people, is what is at the heart of Māoritanga.

Coinciding with the 1950s urban drift of Tūhoe away from Te Urewera, the Pākehā paradise notion of National Park came along. McCahon knew, in the mid 1970s that if Māori values had a say in National Park Policy in New Zealand, it was trivial compared with the scenic beauty of what Crown science decreed to be the lands natural state. His abhorrence of picturesque landscape art ensured *Urewera Mural* would be no lake scene amid brooding mountains nor canoes of Māori vanishing into the cold mists of history. Nevertheless, he saw great beauty in landscapes, not least Te Urewera's.

To my sense of New Zealand, *Urewera Mural* corroborates Colin McCahon as a visionary figure in our history. In this oracle, his 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, a 21st century Te Urewera, to which Toi and Pōtiki's children and the rest of us alike are guided from the preservationist, human excluding notion of nature so central to Euro-American civilisation and its imperative to control all others. From what has been termed 'Green Imperialism'.

Geoff Park

A writer on New Zealand Ecology and History.

Mo Te Peita a Makana

Tērā i ngā tau whitu tekau, ka noho māua ko te Rangihau ki te Poari o Te Urewera. Ko tētahi mahi ko te mahi i tētahi whare mō te katoa

ki te Āniwaniwa hei mātakitaki i ngā taonga o Te Urewera. Ka oti, ka tirohia te mārakerake o tētahi o ngā pakitara.

Ka whakaarotia me karanga tētahi tohunga hei mahi i tētahi peita. Ka whakaaro au mō Te Wakaunua, engari ka riro te pōti mō Makāna. Mea ake, ka tae mai te whakaatu ki te Poari kua oti, me ngā whakaahua paku. Ka pātai te Tiamana mō ētahi o ngā mema kia haere ki Tāmaki ki te titiro. Kāre au i haere, he kore nōku e rata ana ki ngā whakaahua paku, anō noa nei, nā te pīpī noa ēnei ūkuikui. I Tāmaki, ka hui atu ngā mema me te Rangihau ki te titiro, ka whakataua kia hokona mai.

Ka tae mai ki te Āniwaniwa, ka whakamāramatia tōna tikanga. Ko te tikanga hei whakatumēke i te tangata, hei whakaoho i te tangata ki te tautohetohe i tēnei mea, i tērā mea.

E meatia ana tātau me ō tātau tīpuna kei te pōuriuri tonu e kau ake ana. Kātahi ka poau mai te mārāma ki waenga. Nō wai tēnei mārāmatanga? I toe māori ai a Te Urewera, arā, ngā ngāherehere, ngā manu, ngā maunga, he noho nō Tūhoe ki te maru o te tipu o te whenua. Ka tae mai nei a tauiwī, ka heria mai ngā mate mai i te moana. Nō reira ko te pātai — nō wai te mārāma e tuhi nei? Mehemea nō te Atua, e pai ana. Tū ki te taha, ko te whetū mārāma ko te Matua Tangata, e pai ana. Ki te taha mauī ko te Rua — aua. Ko te toto ia i maringa ki Maungapōhatu, kāore anō i ea.

E pai ana te kōrero nō Tūhoe te whenua. Engari, ehara tēnei i te kōrero poipoi noa; kei reira hoki ō tātau tīpuna e tanu ana. Ko te whenua nā te Karauna i raweke, ā, e whāia ana i te wā nei ki te whakatika. E pai ana mehemea ka whakaaro mai te Karauna ki te whakatika.

Nō reira waiho tonu te mahi a Makāna ki roto i te whare o te Karauna hei ara whakamāori atu i ō tātau mate. Kia ea mai ēnei mate ka nuku atu ai tātau me ā tātau ake.

Na Tama Nikora

Tūhoe kaumatua



Colin McCahon, New Zealand, 1919 - 1987, *Urewera Mural* 1975, acrylic on unstretched canvas, 2550 x 5445mm, Collection of Department of Conservation, Āniwaniwa Visitors Centre, Lake Waikaremoana

COLIN McCAHON BIOGRAPHY

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.

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