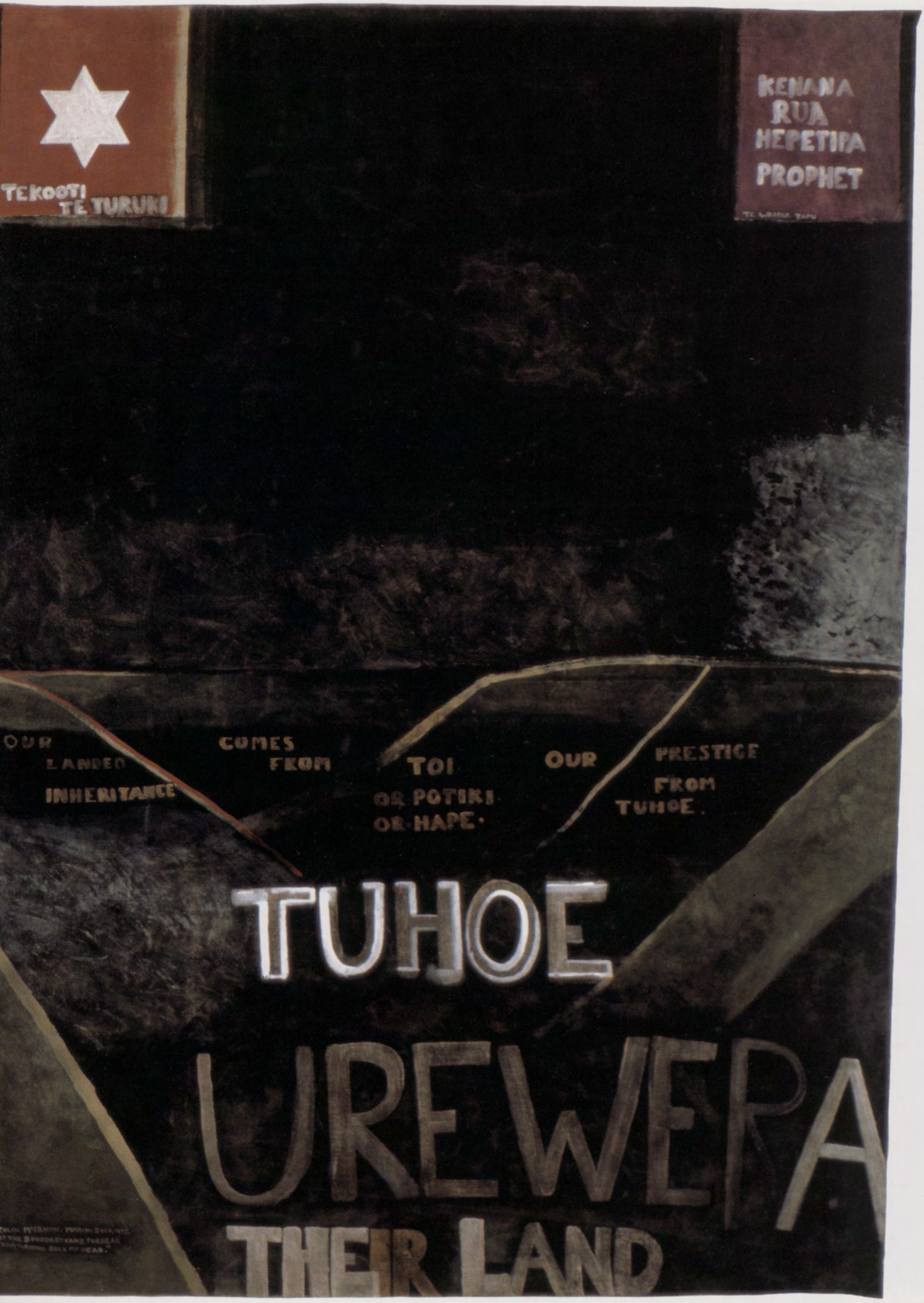

TE KOOTI TE TURUKI
KENANA RUA HEPETIPA PROPHET
OUR LANDED INHERITANCE
COMES FROM
TOI OR POTIKI OR HAPE.
OUR PRESTIGE FROM TUHOE.
TUHOE
UREWERA
THEIR LAND

McCahon
A VIEW FROM UREWERA

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Increasingly, Colin McCahon emerges as the outstanding New Zealand artist of the 20th century. His forthcoming exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, will be a further step in his recognition internationally as a major artist of the modern era.

Colin McCahon's *Urewera Mural* is almost certainly the most famous artwork produced in this country during the last century. The theft of the painting from the Department of Conservation headquarters at Aniwanawa in 1997, and its retrieval 15 months later, filled columns of newspaper space.

Not only did the theft highlight the outstanding grievances of Tuhoe and other Maori tribes, it also drew attention to the power of the visual arts to challenge, as well as inspire. Ironically, this late in the century, it took the removal of an artwork rather than the creation of one to make such an emphatic statement.

Beyond recent events, the *Urewera Mural* takes us back to the time McCahon embarked upon the work: 1975, the year of the Maori Land March. It attests to the historical moment when many New Zealanders came to realise that the country's past was not a closed book. That also happened to be the year the Waitangi Tribunal was formed.

McCahon was, at once, a 'difficult' painter and one committed to the community at large. His paintings confront us and ask that we examine our lives and acknowledge the spiritual essence of our country. It is appropriate, then, that some of the nation's greatest paintings of the 20th century are exhibited in the gallery as we proceed into the 21st century.

We are immensely grateful to the Department of Conservation and other collectors—private and public—for lending these artworks for this exhibition.

Paula Savage, City Gallery Wellington, 1999.

Toss in Greymouth, 1959

BIG TREE TRANSMISSION

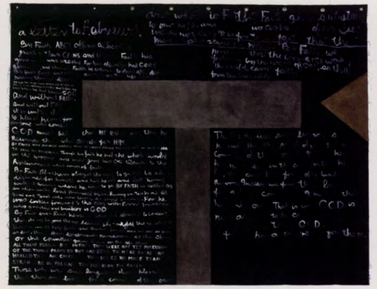
McCAHON'S TAU CROSS

What is thought to be the biggest pohutukawa tree in the world can be found at Te Araroa, near East Cape. Some of the branches of this ancient tree—called Te Waha o Rerekohu—have grown so heavy they touch the ground. Over time, these branches, at the point they make contact with the soil, have developed their own root systems so that water, instead of being drawn from the tree-trunk, is taken directly up into the branches and flows back from there towards the main body of the tree.

The process of give and take embodied by Te Waha o Rerekohu is particularly relevant to McCahon's *Urewera Mural* (1976), a work which drew its inspiration and subject matter from Te Urewera and its inhabitants, the Tuhoe people. Today, we find McCahon's painting has itself become a source, a form of enrichment (albeit, as is now well-known, a contentious one) and a means through which people from beyond the Urewera region have come to an awareness of the place and its significance to Maori.

McCahon's *Urewera Mural* has at its centre another big tree: a kauri-like pillar with the nearby inscription 'Tane Atua', the forest god. Like a Maori pou or land-marker, it tells us where we are. Another inscription, 'At the boundary can I forbear from turning back my head' aligns the motif with the traditional pou whenua, which was used to mark out boundaries. Accordingly, the pillar stands between the viewer and the stylised Urewera landscape, asserting the integrity and ownership of what lies beyond it.

In the lower right corner, McCahon foregrounds the words: 'TUHOE / UREWERA / THEIR LAND' in a manner reminiscent of the classic New Zealand farm-gate notice, with its hand-painted imperative to 'KEEP OUT' or 'SHUT THE GATE'. Like the pou whenua, the words on the mural must be acknowledged before the viewer can proceed into the verdant darkness beyond.



A Letter to Hebrews, 1979

The cross-bar at the top of the central pillar in the *Urewera Mural* transforms it into a T-shaped Egyptian or tau cross. In fact, the tau cross runs like a sequence of telegraph poles through the works in this exhibition. Spoken and written words amass on either side of—or above—these poles. It's as if McCahon has intercepted André Derain's 1901 letter to Maurice de Vlaminck, with its exhortation: 'The telephone wires must be made enormous, so much goes on along them.' McCahon's weighty communications are transmitted from canvas to canvas, the voices shifting from Maori to English then back again. This epic, collaged narrative includes a passage from St Paul's 'Letter to the Hebrews', passages of Maori poetry (and English translations), some 'found' pieces of language, a few phrases by the artist himself and a poem by McCahon's friend, Toss Woollaston.

A symbol of divine power used by the Israelites in Egypt, the tau cross was later assimilated into the Christian tradition as the crucifix.[1] In the *Urewera Mural*, the motif also embodies the downward fall of light (representing grace and enlightenment) and the upward journey towards the light (salvation). McCahon's friend, the poet James K. Baxter, went on to describe the vertical beam of the cross as a symbol of the relationship between Humanity and God, while the horizontal beam symbolised *caritas*, or communal love, between people.

In *May His Light Shine (Tau Cross)* (1978-79), the tau cross is suggestive of an altar or table on which the products of the land and of human labour are either offered up or consumed, whereas in *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness* (1971), the T-shape is a body of light above and between two bluffs—'the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape'. The tau cross in *The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai* (1975), is more oblique—a block of sky seen between two cliffs, this time on Auckland's west coast, where McCahon had a studio.

Colin McCahon's interest in the formal and symbolic qualities of the tau cross (which derived from both the letter T and the crucifix) stemmed from two childhood encounters. Born in Timaru in 1919 and raised in Dunedin, as a boy McCahon watched a sign-writer painting HAIRDRESSER AND TOBACCONIST on a shop window and was struck by 'the grace of the lettering' which 'pointed to a new and magnificent world of painting.'[2] The cross as a symbol of mortality had a darker advent, arising from an incident near Oamaru: 'I remember the death of a parachutist whose parachute failed to open and the white cross was erected against the low North Otago hills where he fell.'[3]

While a white cross recurs throughout McCahon's oeuvre, in the earliest painting in this exhibition, *Toss in Greymouth* (1959), the cross is a silhouetted structure—reminiscent of a figure with outstretched arms—in an evening landscape. For McCahon, the tau cross was an intensely human symbol—referencing the shape of an aeroplane, a power-pole and the first letter of Toss Woollaston's Christian name, just as readily as it did Christ's Passion.

McCahon referred to the tau cross as his 'load-bearing structure', accentuating its practical applications as the girder of a bridge or foundation/pillar of both Maori and Pakeha dwellings. A 1978 series of small paintings, *Truth from the King Country: Load Bearing Structures*, melded the famous Mangaweka Viaduct with the tau cross. The motif was hinted at much earlier in McCahon's work: in both the human-built structures of *Triptych: On Building Bridges* (1952) and the word paintings of that same decade. Underlying all of the potential readings of the motif is its formal presence as an emblem of support, balance and robust symmetry.

T

A form of activism and, in the artist's words, 'a potent way of talking', McCahon's Urewera works uphold Maori attitudes to the land and the enduring significance of the indigenous language as well as specific Maori texts. In this respect, the *Urewera Mural* is both an elegiac and a hopeful work. While the inscriptions on land and sky seem to imply that the Maori language has been banished to such hinterlands as the Urewera—a poignant observation at the time the work was painted—on the other hand, the landscape is also presented here as cradle and nest of the language.

A Song for Rua, Prophet, 1979

The commission to produce the *Urewera Mural* for the Department of Conservation centre at Aniwaniwa was taken up by McCahon in 1975, two years after he had produced his other major reflection on Maori spirituality and social history, the *Paribaka Triptych*. Asked to explore the theme of 'the mystery of Man in the Urewera', McCahon was immediately drawn to the story of 19th century Tuhoe leader Te Kooti, who founded the Ringatu religion, integrating elements from the Old and New Testament with Maoritanga. His follower, Rua Kenana, saw himself in the role of Maori Messiah, as prophesied by Te Kooti, and established a community at Maungapohatu in 1905. Like other millenarial prophets, Rua equated the Maori with the Israelites (hence the particular aptness of the tau cross in the *Urewera Mural*) and believed they would achieve their rightful status and land-rights with the advent of the Maori millennium.

The words on the mural are taken from a traditional Maori poem which McCahon translated as:

THE STONE MOUNTAIN AND THE SOUTH WIND.
HEAR ME! O SOUTH WIND:
THE STONE MOUNTAIN IS THE MOUNTAIN.
COME—PREPARE FOOD FOR OUR ILLUSTRIOUS MEN:
THE TIME HAS COME FOR FOOD AND GAMES.
HEAR ME! TUHOE ARE THE PEOPLE AND RUA IS THEIR PROPHET.
SEE THE STIRRING OF THE LAKE.

Standing at the boundary of Te Urewera—a threshold of understanding as well as geography—McCahon is listening to the words of the prophets and acknowledging the Tuhoe ancestors. He is not presuming to speak on their behalf. Instead we listen, by way of McCahon's 'transmissions', to 'nga reo ora o tangata mate'—the living voices of dead men. Works like the *Urewera Mural* and *A Letter to Hebrews* (1979) are paintings *for* the prophets, be they Maori or otherwise. McCahon underlined the words, 'It is for their faith that the men of old stand on record', in the latter work—an apposite statement in relation to the *Mural*, in which Te Kooti and Rua are seen to stand as equals of the 'men of old' recorded in the Bible.

Painted three years after the *Urewera Mural*, *A Song for Rua: Prophet* (1979) and *May His Light Shine (Tau Cross)* witness a further grounding of McCahon's prophetic vision of New Zealand. Francis Pound has written of the fixation of the latter work on 'the soil as the site of consecration to the Spirit…the soil as the site of nativeness—marked here by Maoriness (the "Kumara Patch"); the soil as the site of roots and rootedness, at once of agriculture and belonging…'[4]

Metaphors of growing and regeneration, which underlie the *Urewera Mural*, are to the fore in *May His Light Shine (Tau Cross)*, which depicts, in the artist's words, the 'TAU CROSS AS KUMARA GOD'. The idea of both spiritual and material sustenance informs another inscription at the foot of this work: 'MINE THOU LORD OF LIFE SEND MY ROOTS RAIN'. In keeping with the teachings of Te Kooti and Rua, McCahon's works are idiosyncratic yet immensely powerful reconfigurations of Maori and Pakeha symbolic systems.

T

'I sing my paintings to myself,' wrote Colin McCahon in 1972. And so he sings them for us—whether it be the emphatic score of St Paul's epistle, or the lyricism of Toss Woollaston's poem which appears in *Toss in Greymouth*: 'Alit on the flax, a tui at dusk / and broke the / late evening / open / with / song.'[5] The song of Woollaston's tui had appeared the previous year in McCahon's *Northland Panels*, in which the word TUI is repeated three times on one panel. Birds, as graphic notation and symbol, resurface in *The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai*, which is a stylised depiction of the gannet colony at Muriwai. Here McCahon pictorialises the nurturing impulse common to all living things, as well as the forcefulness needed to get the young out of their nests and into the air. This work sums up two principal functions of McCahon's art: to nourish and protect the spirit, and to challenge and breach the limits of the physical world. It also encapsulates the need, as Gordon Brown relates, to 'respect certain rules but, at the same time … take chances'.[6]

Evoking diving birds, arrangements of flowers and orbiting planets, the formations of dots that dominate the upper section of *The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai* reappear in *A Poster for the Urewera 2*, although in this case they have become rosary beads with crucifixes attached.

T

Removed from the Visitors' Centre in Aniwaniwa on 5 June 1997 as an act of political protest, the *Urewera Mural* was returned 15 months later. During that time the theft fuelled an extensive public debate about the work and the issues it embodied. Since then, the painting has continued to puzzle, astonish and even antagonise viewers. Painter Shane Cotton has written:

Our perception of the work is forever changed. While McCahon will always be acknowledged as delivering a message that Tuhoe are the Tangata Whenua of the Urewera, Tane Iti and Te Kaha Karaitiana [two figures involved in the removal of the work] will always be acknowledged as Tuhoe artisans who literally took McCahon at his word, imbuing the work, through their infamous interaction with it, with the ihi (power), the wehi (awe) and the mana (prestige) that is Ngai Tuhoe.[7]

The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai, 1975

Paradoxically, the *Urewera Mural* addresses the past and present of a communal people without depicting any figures. If the painting reflects something of the essence of the Urewera it is by allusion. McCahon does not assume the right to 'represent' the spirituality of the people or to speak on their behalf. The artwork makes, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, 'an allusion to the unpresentable', the unpresentable in this case being the soul of a people, their history, mana, sadness and joy. As Shane Cotton suggests, McCahon delivers a message but he is not the source of the message. What he does is take us as far as the boundary—the poi whenua—and leaves us at the intersection of indigenous and imported tradition—a place of inspiration and hope, as well as anxiety and regret.

Turning from that place, we follow the rueful logic of McCahon's tau crosses, arrayed across the rest of the country like the conductors of some other-worldly electricity or communications system. While the argument of these paintings is as central as the Main Trunk Line to New Zealand's self-definition, when we look closely at the geographical co-ordinates of the works in this exhibition, we find they are also a paean to the far-flung and the provincial. They assert the centrality of such locales as Muriwai, Ninety Mile Beach, Westland, and most poignantly of all, the Urewera—for it is on the edge of Tuhoe Country, Te Urewera, that this particular power-grid is sourced and where some of the crucial voices in McCahon's art begin their transmission.

Nga reo ora o tangata mate.

Gregory O'Brien, City Gallery Wellington, 1999

May His Light Shine (Tau Cross), 1978-79

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

Urewera Mural
1976
acrylic on canvas, 2440 x 5490mm
Department of Conservation

Toss in Greymouth
1959
enamel on hardboard, 577 x 1060mm
Collection of the Bishop Suter Art Gallery, Nelson.
Gifted by Sir Toss will Woollaston, 1984

A Letter to Hebrews
1979
acrylic on canvas, 1870 x 2390mm
Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

The Care of Small Birds, Muriwai
1975
oil on canvas, 1730 x 920mm
Chartwell Collection,
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki,
courtesy of Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato

May His Light Shine (Tau Cross)
1978-79
oil on canvas, 1880 x 2380mm
Chartwell Collection,
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki,
courtesy of Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato

A Song for Rua: Prophet
1979
acrylic on three sheets of paper
730 x 1100mm (each panel)
Fletcher Challenge Collection, Auckland

A Poster for the Urewera 1
1975
acrylic on paper, 1100 x 730mm
Collection of J. Gibbs Trust, Auckland

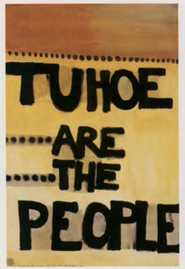
A Poster for the Urewera 2
1975
acrylic on paper, 1100 x 730mm
Private collection, Wellington

The Days and Nights in the Wilderness
1971
acrylic on canvas, 2360 x 1840mm
Collection of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Untitled (Hear me, O South Wind)
1976
pencil on paper, 170 x 117mm
FHE Galleries, Auckland

Figure and Cross
1947
conté on paper, 414 x 265mm
Collection of the Hocken Library, Dunedin

Untitled (painted gourd)
1961
solpah on gourd
FHE Galleries, Auckland



Posters for the Urewera, 1&2, 1975

Special thanks to William McCahon, Gordon H. Brown, Gerald Barnett, Peter McLeavey, Kendrah Morgan and Ngahiraka Mason.

1 Gordon H. Brown writes that the tau cross was 'frequently associated with Moses: first, as a sign with which the Israelites marked the doorposts of their dwellings in Egypt on the night of the Passover, and secondly, as the shape of the staff, with the brazen serpent, lifted up by Moses while in the wilderness'. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Reed, Auckland, 1984), p.166.
2 Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80 (Spring 1966), p.361.
3 Colin McCahon, ibid. p.362.
4 Francis Pound, *The Space Between (Pakeha Use of Maori Motifs in Modernist New Zealand Art)* (Workshop Press, 1994), p.96.
5 Not untypically, McCahon made two minor errors (or were they conscious alterations?) when rendering Woollaston's poem, the original of which began 'lit on the flax', and the operative verb was 'shot' rather than 'broke' (correspondence from Woollaston to G. O'Brien, 1996).
6 Gordon H. Brown, ibid. p.181-182.
7 Shane Cotton, 'work in transit, destination unknown', *VISIT* no.2 (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, August 1999).

The paintings in this brochure are reproduced courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publications Trust.

McCahon: A View From Urewera, 6 November 1999-13 January 2000
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Urewera Mural, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 2440 x 5490mm. Department of Conservation