

A black and white photograph of Colin McCahon, a man with short, dark hair, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark, zippered jacket. His right hand is resting on a table in the foreground, near some papers and a small object. The background is a simple, light-colored wall with a window or opening visible.

COLIN McCAHON

**There is Only Vol. 1
One Direction 1919–1959**

Peter Simpson



Colin McCahon at Pangatōtara, 1939.
E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon Artist File

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DUNEDIN, NELSON, WELLINGTON, 1937–46

The decade between 1937 and 1946, encompassing World War II and the years when McCahon was aged between sixteen and twenty-seven – from schoolboy to family man – was complicated by frequent travel and short-term sojourns in various parts of the country. He spent winter terms of 1937–39 at the Dunedin School of Art but at other times was travelling around the South Island from Southland to Nelson with a somewhat hapless theatre venture, or working as a seasonal labourer (apples, tobacco, hops) in various parts of the Nelson region – Māpua, Pangatōtara, Riwaka, Ruby Bay – interspersed with periods in Wellington and back in Dunedin, at a variety of occupations, some paid, some voluntary.

Many crucial friendships (a number lifelong) were formed at this time: R. N. Field, Rodney Kennedy, Doris Lusk, Anne Hamblett (later his wife), Toss and Edith Woollaston, Patrick Hayman, Elespie Forsyth, Ron O'Reilly, Arthur Prior, John Summers, Charles Brasch, James K. Baxter, John Beaglehole, Sam Williams, Ernst Plischke, Hilda and Mario Fleischl and others. This was a time when armed conflict first impended, then arrived, and the country was at war with Germany and Japan, threatened with invasion, and questions of military service or default loomed large for McCahon and many of his friends. They were also the years of his courtship and marriage to fellow artist Anne Hamblett and the birth of their first two children. Throughout this decade McCahon continued to work earnestly if intermittently at his painting and drawing, first exhibited with the Otago Art Society and The Group, experienced the first controversy aroused by his art, and mounted his first solo show at the French Maid Coffee House in Wellington. By the end of the decade he had achieved a measure of artistic maturity with *Otago Peninsula* (1946) and other works and was poised for breakthrough as an artist.



R. N. Field, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1932.
Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 3-2009, purchased
2009 with funds from the Dunedin City Council,
reproduced courtesy of the Estate of R. N. Field

Dunedin School of Art, 1937–39

McCahon attended the Dunedin School of Art between 1937 and 1939; he never put in a full year, starting part-way through 1937 (after leaving school mid-year), and spending parts of both 1938 and 1939 out of Dunedin. He later paid eloquent tribute to Robert Nettleton Field (1899–1987), the most influential of his teachers, less for the specifics of his teaching than for the example he embodied. A 1966 essay ended: ‘Nothing more came from the School but a love of painting and a tentative technique; the painter’s life was for me exemplified by the life and work of R. N. Field.’¹ And elsewhere: ‘Field was one of the few people who really mattered to me as teachers. . . . It’s all the goodness of the teacher passing to the pupil – and Bob Field did just this.’²

Field came to New Zealand in 1925 with his friend W. H. Allen (1894–1988), both recent graduates of the Royal College of Art in London; they were appointed to the School of Art attached to the King Edward VII Technical College in Dunedin under the scheme named after the Superintendent for Technical Instruction, W. S. La Trobe, to improve the teaching in New Zealand art schools. Improvements were desperately needed; in Dunedin prior to their arrival student numbers had dwindled drastically and resources were rudimentary. Allen and Field worked effectively to increase numbers and improve quality. In 1928 they established the Six and Four Club mixing students and teachers (i.e., six women, four men), who met at Field’s house in Andersons Bay for art projects, discussion and socialising.

Field was artistically more adventurous than Allen, both in painting (bright Fauvist-inflected colours) and sculpture (direct carving of stone), his main models being his famous classmates Henry Moore (1898–1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975). His thinking about art broadly reflected the ideas of the Bloomsbury Group critics Clive Bell (1881–1964) and Roger Fry (1866–1934), who had championed post-Impressionism in the United Kingdom. Rejected initially by the Otago Art Society (OAS) for the mild radicalism of his work, Field was welcomed by the progressive Christchurch Group, exhibiting regularly with them from 1931. Fortuitously, Woollaston, briefly studying – most unhappily – at the Canterbury College School of Art, felt ‘wild excitement’ at Field’s paintings in the 1931 Group Show, such as the vibrant *Christ at the Well of Samaria* (1929): ‘His pictures, brilliant and heady, were painted with jewel-like, full-sized brush strokes, or with rainbow-like spots and scales of pure paint shimmering on unpainted backgrounds of wood or canvas.’³

In 1932 Woollaston cycled from Māpua to Dunedin to study with Field for two terms (all he could afford) and joined the Six and Four club, along with Rodney Kennedy (briefly his lover) and Edith Alexander (later his wife). In his autobiography, Woollaston

wrote: ‘Dunedin in 1932 was the most artistically enlightened place in New Zealand. They were looking at artists unheard of in Christchurch – Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne and others of the French; and English ones like Matthew Smith, Mark Gertler, Roger Fry, and the New Zealand-born Frances Hodgkins. The one quality that united all these artists was excitement.’⁴

Allen left Dunedin for a teaching job in Nelson in 1930, and Field went to England for two years, returning in 1935 enthusiastic about ceramics, child-centred teaching methods in schools, and what became known as Moral Rearmament – he was a follower of the cultish American evangelist Frank Buchman (1878–1961), founder in England of the so-called ‘Oxford Group’. Woollaston himself later became briefly involved in the movement through his uncle Frank Tosswill, a committed Buchmanite, whom McCahon met at the ‘Woollastons’ and remembered in his late canvas, *A Painting for Uncle Frank* (1980).

Gordon Tovey (1901–1974), later the founder of an influential scheme of art advisors in schools, became head of school in 1936, and in 1937 – McCahon’s first year – the school moved to a new location in York Place. The student population was largely female. Kennedy had already left but Doris Lusk and Anne Hamblett were still students – all three became friends and mentors. ‘The older (and more advanced) pupils drifted around being very superior and aloof. . . . I did winter terms at the School and worked in Nelson in the summer . . . Later on I married one of the superior girls [Anne Hamblett] . . .’⁵

Field’s ideas were articulated in articles in *Art in New Zealand* in 1940 on Colour, Line, Form and Composition (or Design). He passed on to McCahon his thinking, for instance, about form: ‘The rearrangement and rendering of things according to the spiritual urge, is the mainspring of all art . . . In regard to the graphic form, light and dark are the raw materials of its construction.’⁶ And about design: ‘Modern art in general has stripped art bare of incidents in an endeavour to probe to the depths the significance of form. . . . [T]he supreme exponent of this quality is Cézanne . . . every part of a picture is essential to every other part in a well-ordered scheme.’⁷

Around forty works from his art-school years currently appear on the Colin McCahon Online Catalogue,⁸ many of them preserved in family bequests in Hocken Collections, Dunedin, and the Forrester Gallery, Ōamaru. Most were landscapes (around twenty-seven), together with some still lifes and a few abstracts, portraits and posters. As regards medium, there were roughly equal numbers of watercolours and oil paintings, plus some gouaches, drawings in pencil or ink, and mixed media works. Responding to a *Press* review of his work in the 1940 Group Show – his first significant exhibition – the twenty-one-year-old McCahon defended the somewhat scatter-shot character of his student-period work: ‘Probably what



The Six and Four Club, 1932: R. N. Field
(back right), Rodney Kennedy and Toss
Woollaston (front).

Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena,
University of Otago, P1986-016-021



Art school still life, c. 1936–38,
oil on cardboard, 394 x 485 mm



Vase of flowers, 1939,
oil on cardboard, 202 x 245 mm

seemed rather curious to them was the mixture of styles of painting which is only to [be] expected at my age (which they wouldn't know) as very few artists develop a personal style until about 30.⁹

Most of McCahon's early landscapes depict locations around his home town of Dunedin (Botanic Garden, Tahuna Park, Woodhaugh, Dunedin city) and Otago (Taieri Mouth, Brighton, Otago Peninsula, Tomahawk Beach, Sandy Mount, Saddle Hill), while others have Nelson settings (Māpua, Riwaka, Golden Bay), reflecting his working visits there from 1938 onwards. The direct influence of Field is most evident in a sketchy incompleteness of image. Fraser remarked: '... Field likes to leave areas of the ground – often the unprimed canvas or board or paper – showing through.'¹⁰ Similar effects are seen in *Elespie Forsyth* (1939, p. 71), in which grain of the plywood support shows clearly through the ink and watercolour; the face, however, has the linear directness of an African mask, suggesting that McCahon was also aware of stronger models (Gauguin, Picasso) than the comparatively restrained Field.

There is a similar economy of colour and line in such watercolour landscapes as *Landscape from North end of Tomahawk Beach* (c. 1935–37, p. 70), executed with calligraphic swiftness and confidence, and in *Composition* (1938), an abstract featuring spontaneous doodling, reminiscent of biomorphic images by Len Lye and other surrealists. McCahon's first oil paintings are somewhat less distinctive, though manifesting a rough vigour, as in the robust and chunky *Art school still life* (c. 1936–38), *Otaio Gorge* (1938, p. 70), based on a photograph of a South Canterbury location – a well-constructed work of subdued colour and ambiguous forms – and *Vase of flowers* (1939), notable for its bright palette, heavily outlined forms, and elevated perspective (a Cézanne-derived device).

Māpua, Dunedin, 1938–39

From 1938, McCahon regularly abandoned art school for several months each summer and left Dunedin in search of paid work. On his first such venture he and a friend, Owen Roberts, joined Fred Argyle's Variety Review Company for performances in small towns and settlements around the South Island between January and May 1938; McCahon's main roles were advance publicity and occasional comedian. They rehearsed in Invercargill in January; performed throughout Southland and Central Otago in February; worked their way up the east coast of the South Island, appearing mainly in railway workers' camps (the main Christchurch–Picton line was under construction), through Kaikōura and on to Wakefield south of Nelson in March; and finally to the West Coast where the tour was abandoned, leaving the members unpaid. Commercially the venture was a flop – they seldom made enough to pay for accommodation and often slept rough in barns and even under bridges – but on the whole McCahon enjoyed the adventure, as he

told his sister from Wakefield: 'Don't think I'm unhappy – I'm not – we're having a glorious time being real vagabonds & gipsies – at any rate it's all right in the Summer – it's not at all cold – The Nelson air is lovely – noticeably different from the Dunedin air.'¹¹

Perhaps the Nelson climate encouraged his next away-from-home venture: he cycled with Kennedy from Dunedin to Nelson to stay in the Woollastons' temporarily vacated house at Māpua – an orcharding settlement near Nelson – picking apples for the 1938–39 summer season. Woollaston had gone to Christchurch to spend time at the art school on a scheme financed by his patrons, the poets Ursula Bethell (1874–1945) and Charles Brasch, while his wife Edith was in Dunedin with her family. This epic bike ride took about two weeks with occasional stopovers. The six-day journey from Christchurch to Nelson may explain the title of a famous painting twelve years later: *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1950).

McCahon and Kennedy spent the summer of 1938–39 living in Woollaston's self-built, clay-brick house at Māpua and working on local orchards. In the New Year they were joined by Anne Hamblett, Doris Lusk, Patrick Hayman and Elespie Forsyth. McCahon wrote home about their summer idyll with a 'house full' of congenial friends and a gentle estuarine landscape made familiar by Woollaston's depictions:

I have been working very hard drawing the Mapua landscape but as yet have done nothing really satisfactory. We draw in the mornings and evenings & eat at midday. It is so hot.

Toss has a lovely house. Really very large – practically all the south side open. The wind never seems to blow in and even in the evenings it is warm. . . .

Doris & I are going up the hill behind the house to draw & possibly paint soon when it becomes cooler. There is a lovely view of the usual Mapua landscape . . . orchards hills pine trees & inlets & bays with D'Urville Island on the horizon.¹²

Of the drawing, *Mapua Landscape* (1939 p. 41), McCahon later wrote:

This drawing shows Toss Woollaston's favourite landscape with Wakefield's shed and the willow tree that appears in a number of early Woollaston paintings . . . one of dozens that I did during the summer of 1938–39 when I was living at Mapua . . . [T]he lines were made with a piece of grass stalk used in the same way as you use a pen while the areas of tone came about by using my finger to spread the ink while it was still slightly wet . . .¹³



Picnic at Māpua, 1939: from left, Rodney Kennedy, Doris Lusk, Anne Hamblett, Colin McCahon and Elespie Forsyth.
Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, P1989-016-008



At Māpua, 1939: from left, Patrick Hayman, Colin McCahon, Elespie Forsyth, Doris Lusk, Rodney Kennedy.
Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, MS-0996-012/060/019, Charles Brasch papers

Orchard work, however, left little time and energy for painting; the days were long and the work tiring; weekends mostly went on clothes washing, house cleaning and other chores. After the others left, McCahon sometimes went drawing with Hamblett, who had stayed on in Māpua for orchard work: He told his parents: ‘Last Friday Sat. & Sun. we must each have done about 40 drawings none of which have been kept. We draw with charcoal and just rub out the results – you can do such a lot on one piece of paper before it wears out.’¹⁴ At this stage, Hamblett, several years older (she was born in 1915), was the more accomplished artist. In March, McCahon explained why drawing was dominating his practice:

I haven’t painted anything for weeks – in fact I tied up my paints & put them away so I wouldn’t be tempted. When your [*sic*] working out anything it is much better to do it by drawing and get that near perfect before trying to paint again.

I have an awful urge to paint round Dunedin again – Brighton way & the Peninsula – I might have to come home & do it after the season.¹⁵

Indeed, when the season ended, he went back to Dunedin and got involved in theatre designing. It was during these months that he painted his first ‘landmark’ (his term) painting: *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* (1939).

Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill, 1939

Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill (pp. 72–73) was a large oil (750 x 1333 mm), painted when McCahon was twenty. In notes of a talk McCahon gave in 1963, Brasch reported: ‘This 1939 painting was done mostly on the spot, the first painting to be distinctly his, the first to say something new. It stated the orderliness of the NZ landscape – not “wild & untamed”, but based on a small number of forms which are repeated in various orders.’¹⁶

McCahon familiarised himself with his subject not only by climbing Peggy’s Hill, a high point on Otago Peninsula with a commanding view of Harbour Cone and the harbour entrance, but also by studying Charles Cotton’s classic *Geomorphology* (1926, 1942), first encountered at the Dunedin Public Library. He recalled Cotton’s importance in a letter to Ron O’Reilly in 1972: ‘I’ve used it solidly for landscape information . . . I loved his drawings for the way they told about things. I have since then constantly referred to Cotton to explain what it is I have actually seen . . . the anatomy of the landscape . . . Nobody told me about Cotton I just found him on a book shelf . . .’¹⁷ Cotton’s line drawings (there are 470 of them in *Geomorphology*) ignored all surface features – buildings, trees, pylons, houses, roads etc. – in order to reveal the underlying

geological structure of the land. McCahon replicates this feature in *Harbour Cone*, apart from a few ribbons of vegetation.

The first exhibition of *Harbour Cone* involved controversy of a kind that would accompany McCahon throughout his career; he called it ‘my first battle’.¹⁸ Along with fellow students, including Hamblett, Lusk and Max Walker, McCahon became a member of the OAS in 1938, with the right to exhibit a work each year. In 1939 he submitted *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* but the selection committee refused to hang it. At the time, McCahon was at Pangatōtara near Motueka, working on a tobacco farm. He only heard about the brouhaha in Dunedin from letters.

He told Woollaston that his picture had been rejected and that his friends had withdrawn from the exhibition in protest:

My Art Society painting has been rejected. This is really something as I am a member and am therefore entitled to have at least one picture hung. Evidently they have been having a very bright time in Dunedin, plenty of excitement, 6 or 7 people have withdrawn their pictures as a protest etc . . . It’s bloody annoying as it’s a damn good picture, quite the best I’ve painted, I think and a damn sight better than most of the usual mush they hang.¹⁹

He told his sister Beatrice:

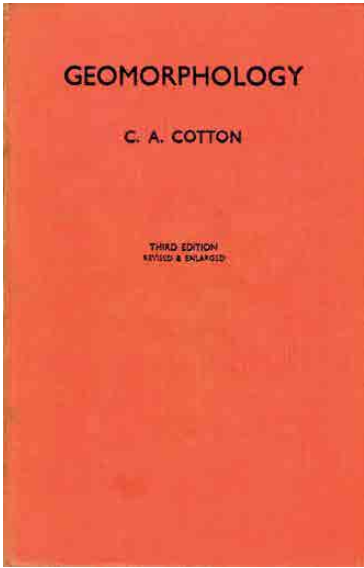
As yet I haven’t written to the Art Society but am going to do so sending in my resignation and a few comments on their behaviour . . . Doris says that the Council thought I had painted the picture just as a joke on them . . . This shows that they are really incapable of judging what is really a good painting & what a bad one.²⁰

McCahon did not resign from the OAS, at least not permanently. His Dunedin friends planned an alternative group, a kind of *salon des refusés*, but at the instigation of the head of the art school, Tovey, changed tactics and got themselves elected to the selection panel. McCahon’s works were duly selected for exhibition in 1940–44, including *Otago Peninsula with Sandy Mount* in 1940, *Riwaka Valley, Nelson* in 1941 (p. 54), *Landscape Mahau* in 1942 (p. 52), *Woman on riverbank* in 1943 and *Bathers, Motueka River* in 1944 (p. 75) (his name is not included in the 1944 catalogue but his inclusion is known from contemporary letters).

A thoughtful letter to Woollaston about the disturbing rejection in 1939 gives insight into McCahon’s radical social, political and religious ideas at the time (soon after the outbreak of the war), and his exaggeratedly idealistic hopes for painting:



Colin McCahon and fellow student Max Walker, Dunedin, 1938.
E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon
Artist File



Cover (right) and illustration (below) from C. A. Cotton, *Geomorphology of New Zealand: An Introduction to the Study of Landforms*, 3rd edition, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1942.

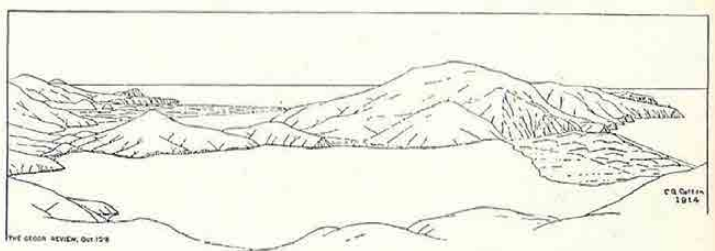
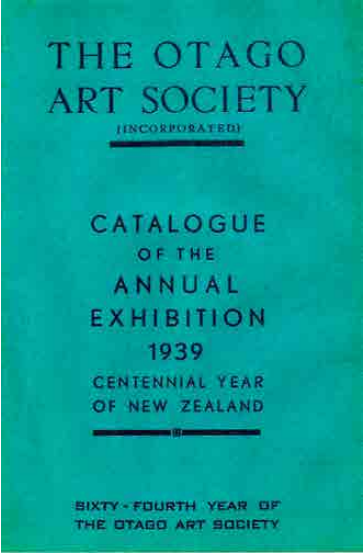


Fig. 436A.—Eastern bays of Otago Peninsula, New Zealand, enclosed by dune-covered bay-bars. (Sand drifts northward.)



Otago Art Society catalogue, 1939. This was the exhibition from which McCahon’s *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* (1939) was rejected.



Beatrice and Colin McCahon with their dog
Joe on the hills above Dunedin, 1930s.
E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon Artist File



Still life [for the play *Professor Mamlock*],
1939, distemper on plywood, 719 x 776 mm

My Art Society picture had all my ideas of architecture applied to painting most fully in it & the Society thought I was joking with them . . . I imagined people looking at it then looking at a landscape & for once really seeing it & being happier for it & then believing in God & the brotherhood of men & the futility of war & the impossibility of people owning & having more right to a piece of air than anyone else. The force of painting as propaganda for social reform is immense if properly wielded . . . Communism it is said stamps out Christianity, Christianity as practised it does stamp out but true communism means true Christianity & I believe that by my painting I help to bring it about.²¹

Remnants of these ideas stayed with him for years.

A perception McCahon found in Cotton which he applied in *Harbour Cone* was that the New Zealand landscape involves the repetition of a small number of forms, apparent in the pronounced conical shape of Peggy’s Hill and its recurrence in smaller form in the right foreground and middle distance. The picture, based on preliminary drawings and McCahon’s understanding of the proportions of the ‘Golden Section’,²² has an ‘architecture’, an elaborate patterning of criss-crossing diagonals and strong horizontals. With its elevated perspective, and high horizon line, everything converges on the point made by the harbour entrance and the top of Peggy’s Hill. The picture’s unity is underscored by its subdued, almost monochromatic colouring, its considered alternation of dark and light tones, and its strongly rhythmical movement, accented by linear patches of vegetation – the only surface feature retained. It was a remarkable achievement for a twenty-year-old.

Rodney Kennedy joined the protest against the OAS’s rejection of *Harbour Cone*. He was ten years older than McCahon, had studied with Field and Allen in 1926–30, and regularly exhibited paintings throughout the 1930s. However, he progressively abandoned painting for theatre activities (acting, directing, designing), in which from the late 1930s he often involved McCahon. Years later Kennedy explained that a major reason for his abandoning painting was his recognition of McCahon’s superior talent. He thought that by comparison his own work was ‘feeble’, derivative, and showed little feeling for New Zealand; he burned much of it on a bonfire.²³ He became one of McCahon’s most important supporters, and the recipient of several works painted specifically for him, including *Crucifixion* (1947, p. 93), *Otago Peninsula* (1946–49), *The Kennedy waterfall drawings* (c. 1966–67, Volume 2) and *Angels and bed no. 1* (1976).

Theatre in Dunedin in the late 1930s was largely sponsored by left-wing political and educational groups. The first productions on which Kennedy and McCahon worked together were Joseph

and Karel Čapek’s *The Insect Play* (1921), a satirical comedy, performed by a Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) group in 1938; Friedrich Wolf’s *Professor Mamlock* (1933), a production organised by the Left Book Club in 1939; and T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) in 1941. Years later, after hearing a radio production of *The Insect Play*, McCahon recalled these involvements:

Kennedy and I did sets & costumes for [*The Insect Play*] in the late 1930’s. It’s a wonderful play. [Ron] O’Reilly was a killer ant . . . The production was backed by the Left Book Club. . . . Later we did “Professor Mamlock” in the RSA hall – this on the brink of government edicts tying up ‘civil liberties’. Theatre in Dunedin rose to great heights in the 30’s – and flopped in the 40’s – for a very long time.²⁴

Ron O’Reilly, at that time an avowed communist, later a librarian and gallery director, who became a friend of McCahon at this time and began collecting his work, recalled: ‘In 1939, immediately before the outbreak of the war, our outfit did an anti-Nazi (anti-Anti-Semitic) play, *Professor Mamlock*, and Colin again did things with the sets and even painted a “Bauhaus” still-life for one of them – my first sight of a modern painting . . .’ (p. 50).²⁵ McCahon’s contribution to *Murder in the Cathedral* was a giant backdrop of a Madonna and child flanked by angels which Lusk and Hamblett helped him paint in a pastiche of medieval style. His ardent involvement with theatre was later revived in Christchurch and Auckland.²⁶

Pangatōtara, Mahau, Māpua, Dunedin, Group Show, 1939–40

In November 1939 McCahon travelled to Pangatōtara in the Motueka Valley west of Nelson city to work on Herbert Helms’ tobacco form. He was accompanied by Fred Jones, a Christchurch friend who later married the painter Rita Angus’s sister, Jean, a sculptor; he was also the brother of Connie, wife of John Summers. McCahon loved the Pangatōtara environment of river valley and hills, and the opportunities it presented for drawing and painting. He wrote to his parents:

Pangatotara is a very beautiful place. Rather like West Coast scenery but not depressing. Our little house is very new & largeish & very clean with a stove & the Motueka River running at the back door . . . On Tuesday . . . I climbed one of the many hills here very high with a lovely view up the valley with the river & very lovely hills, Mt Arthur covered with snow & to the left the Southern Alps . . . I did one watercolour & two drawings . . . quite successful.²⁷



Portrait of Rodney Kennedy, 1939,
pencil on buff paper, 261 x 206 mm



Colin McCahon at his hut on the Helms tobacco farm, Pangatōtara 1939.

E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Colin McCahon
Artist File



Landscape Mahau, 1940,
oil on plywood, 380 x 473 mm

Herbert Helms, for whom McCahon was working, is sometimes presented as a person hospitable to pacifists, but Colin, a radical in political outlook, found him a militaristic imperialist:

I understand they intend to send the special force overseas very shortly. This is applauded by Herbert [Helms]. He wouldn't go himself but likes to feel he and his little farm are being protected. For Herbert the British Empire is tops. Has never & will never be anything wrong. Fred & I preach otherwise with a dash of Communism thrown in and as we are also pacifists they are most upset & indignant.²⁸

He soon joined the Peace Pledge Union, a UK-based pacifist organisation.

At New Year 1940, McCahon joined the Woollastons at Mahau in the Marlborough Sounds where they were living for a period. He told his parents: 'We will be here until the end of February when Rodney, Toss, possibly Fred and I go to Mapua. I have done a number of drawings & one or 2 paintings but nothing of any real value I think. Probably I do not know the country well enough & something will be done in a week or two that is better.'²⁹ One work to survive from this period, a depiction of tangled trunks and branches of chestnut trees, is *Landscape Mahau* (1940).³⁰

McCahon and Jones went to Māpua for the remainder of the fruit-picking season. With Kennedy, who did all the cooking, they stayed with Woollaston (Edith was with her family in Dunedin for the birth of another baby). McCahon and Kennedy dreamed up a plan to start a children's theatre, but when they got back to Dunedin in May 1940 the idea died through lack of interest. He, Kennedy and Lusk painted scenery for the Kern and Hammerstein musical *Sunny* (1925). McCahon also helped Lusk set up her first solo exhibition and did sets and lighting for a WEA reading of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. He also read that classic of pacifist literature *We Will Not Cease* by Archibald Baxter,³¹ father of the poet James K. Baxter, and recommended it to his sister; he was still wavering about the question of pacifism, unlike Kennedy, who was fully committed to the cause.

In August 1940 McCahon wrote excitedly to Beatrice: 'And now for my bit of news magnifiqu. I have been asked to exhibit 12 pictures with the Christchurch [G]roup this year and as perhaps you know their exhibition is definitely *the* show in Christchurch . . . My invitation to exhibit came through Bob Field & Toss doing a spot of string pulling for me.'³² The Group had been operating since 1927 as a progressive alternative to the Canterbury Society of Arts, a conservative body much like its Dunedin equivalent. There were about fifteen active Group members in 1940 (including Field and

Woollaston); to be invited to show with them was a considerable honour for a twenty-one-year-old who had exhibited virtually nothing. Other current members included Evelyn Page, Louise Henderson, Ngaio Marsh, Rata Lovell-Smith, Olivia Spencer Bower, Margaret Anderson, Leo Bensemann and W. H. Allen. McCahon recalled the experience many years later:

I became a member in 1940 and went up to Christchurch to see this first showing. I was bowled over by the spaciousness . . . of the exhibition – you could see the paintings . . . I think my Otago Peninsula (now in the Hocken) was in that show. It was a simple and adequate exhibition – the jumble sale quality was in no way there – then.³³

McCahon was critical of the rapid post-war expansion of The Group.

If by 'my Otago Peninsula' McCahon meant *Harbour Cone* he was mistaken. That work was not shown, though four other peninsula pictures were, including *Otago Peninsula with Sandy Mount*, and both oil and watercolour versions of *4YA Highcliff*, *Otago Peninsula*. Of McCahon's thirteen contributions, ten were oil paintings, plus one pencil drawing, one watercolour, and one sculpture. There were seven landscapes, three still lifes and two portraits. Prices ranged from 3 guineas (for a pencil drawing) to 10 guineas for the oils, and 15 guineas for the sculpture. Several works dated from Colin's recent sojourns in Nelson, including *Nelson landscape, tobacco kilns* (p. 74), from his stint in Pangatōtara, *Landscape, Mahau* from his holiday in the Marlborough Sounds, and portraits of Elespie Forsyth (exhibited as *Head of a Girl*) and Mrs Scott, wife of Hugh Scott, a local painter whom McCahon visited in Māpua.

McCahon's paintings were too rich for the taste of the elderly poet Ursula Bethell, Woollaston's patron, who told Brasch in England: 'Colin McCahon (what a pity his people changed from their Irish O'Cahon!) has a row of oil paintings which seemed to me to be horrible, but may be very good. I like the lad himself very much . . . He's very intelligent . . .'.³⁴ McCahon's entries were a diverse group, demonstrating the young artist's versatility. This was the line taken in the only substantial review, in the *Press* by Charles Grignon, the pseudonym of a Christchurch woman (reputedly the daughter of Bishop West-Watson), who described his work as 'perhaps the most striking feature of this year's exhibition':

To assess his work is not easy, for the remarkable variety of his methods and his ingenuity in the use of materials make it difficult, on a first acquaintance, to grasp his essential



4YA Highcliff, Otago Peninsula, 1940,
watercolour, pen and ink and varnish
on paper, 240 x 315 mm



Exhibition catalogue, McCahon's first
Group Show, 1940.



Riwaka Valley, Nelson, 1941, oil on board, 403 x 486 mm

qualities as a painter. His use of colour is sure, occasionally striking and original, and on the whole limited; while his ‘Portrait of a Girl’ [*Elespie Forsyth*] shows bold, firm drawing and a pleasing sense of form.³⁵

The review had a sting in its tail: ‘The question which must be asked is whether he has ability of the originative order or merely an exceptional insight in to the work of some of the outstanding European artists of the last two decades. The absence of tension in his work suggests the second answer.’³⁶

McCahon wrote to Beatrice (partly quoted earlier) from Riwaka:

The Press was not so bad really. Originative ability I know I have. Probably what seemed rather curious to them was the mixture of styles of painting which is only to [be] expected at my age . . . Which sounds like excuses. Also the lack of tension. As yet I cannot decide whether tension in a picture is necessary or not. Toss says it is, possibly because his paintings are full of tension of a sort which holds all the pieces of the picture together because it lacks complete compositional analysis (proportions balance of lines & spaces etc.). That is the tension of Van Gogh & even Cézanne and what I aim at is the destruction of tension of that sort. The tension of Seurat (if any) where everything is of such perfect shape & proportion that tension no longer exists.³⁷

His response shows the sophistication of McCahon’s thinking about painting at twenty-one. He often, as here, defined his practice partly in relation to Woollaston’s – the painter to whose practice and ideas he was most directly exposed – but with awareness of such European models as van Gogh, Cézanne and Seurat.

Riwaka, Wellington, Dunedin, 1940–41

At the Drummonds’ tobacco farm in Riwaka Valley in 1940, McCahon shared a bach with Kennedy who was working on the next farm. Always interested in the local scenery, he quickly familiarised himself with his new environment, including another epic bike ride over Tākaka Hill to Golden Bay and Collingwood and back, a distance of at least 150 kilometres; a trip that would bear fruit years later in *The Promised Land* (1948, p. 142). They also explored local places: ‘Yesterday was a perfect day as we both had an afternoon off & walked up the Riwaka Valley for several miles, there is a road that ends somewhere at the back of Mount Arthur & the Crusader which we followed but not to the end. Someday we will go by bicycle.’³⁸

That season there were also visits to the Woollastons in Māpua, long bike rides up the Riwaka Valley, and attempts to climb some of the local peaks. In the New Year, Doris Lusk visited. One day, they biked to Ngaio Bay beyond Kaiteriteri for a picnic, and went on by boat to Marahau (now the beginning of the Abel Tasman Walkway): ‘Lovely country with immensely steep bush [covered] hills and wide yellow [sandy] beaches.’³⁹

In March 1941 McCahon was finally called up for military service but appealed on conscientious grounds. He explained the situation to his sister:

I was called up in the last ballot & have sent in my appeal but with a statement of my views in two or three lines which is considered rather more admirable than a long & compleat [*sic*] expression of one’s views owing to the fact that there is less in a few words to pick holes in than in perhaps several pages of writing and there are clever lawyers working on all the cases for the government . . .⁴⁰

Under the influence of the Dunedin Quakers (the Brailsford group), McCahon was far from extreme in his pacifist views, as he told Beatrice: ‘It is really better for the cause of Peace not to be exclusive & fanatical in one’s views, draw the line at armament manufacture & flag waving & money getting for the patriotic funds too I think.’⁴¹

When the tobacco season ended, McCahon went to Māpua for a few weeks to pick apples at Jackson’s orchard, staying with the Woollastons. He noticed local hostility to people of German extraction – numerous in that part of the country: ‘Hatred of German people is encouraged & lapped up . . .’.⁴² He remarked, too, that war consciousness was acute: ‘The Japanese threat hangs darkly over this district like the bush fire smoke. There is more fear here than anywhere else I have been lately.’⁴³

In May he went to Wellington for about three months where Beatrice was already living; he stayed at a boarding house in Boulcott Street. In July he had a factory job: ‘in a small joinery factory in Newto[w]n run by two of Wellington’s conscientious objectors, partly for, really largely for the purpose of giving employment to such as myself who are almost unable to get employment in the world at large’.⁴⁴

Back in Dunedin later in 1941 he worked at Otago Museum painting a panorama for the kea display and on *Murder in the Cathedral*; he also painted scenery for a Chinese concert for which Hamblett made costumes. As for painting, he told Beatrice: ‘I have spent over a month painting an enlargement of one of the Riwaka drawings which has turned out quite excellently (p. 54), another painting of the Otago Harbour with several cabbage trees in the foreground and little, really nothing else of importance.’⁴⁵



Anne, 1942–43, charcoal and gouache on paper, 481 x 398 mm



Colin and Anne McCahon on their wedding day, Dunedin, 21 September 1942.

E. H. McCormick Research Library,
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,
Colin McCahon Artist File

Māpua, Dunedin, marriage, 1942

In mid-February 1942 Colin went north again, once more working at Jackson’s orchard in Māpua. In April, more or less simultaneously, he and his sister announced their plans to get married: Colin to Anne Hamblett, Beatrice to Noel Parsloe. He wrote to Beatrice:

Mother sent me on a letter of yours to read . . . containing the interesting & perhaps surprising news of Noel’s and your intentions for the future . . . This is good news and I am very happy for you.

And now I have some news for you. And news you will not be surprised at either. I think that will be so. About Anne & myself, we are going to be married but when & where & other details I can’t tell you.⁴⁶

Apologising to his parents for not writing, he explained that all spare time went on his art: ‘There is always drawing or painting to be done at present very important as I am trying to develop a new theory of space. But this is not the time when there is fruit to pick.’⁴⁷ He didn’t elaborate on his new theory. The letter also revealed that by this time Kennedy had been incarcerated in Whenuaroa defaulters’ camp near Rotorua. McCahon’s own military service situation was unresolved though he would eventually be excused from service on medical grounds. While thanking his mother for her warm response to his marriage plans, he praised her ‘positive way of pacifism’: ‘It seems that nothing can now stop the war but in your dealings with other people you can & in no small way, show them how to prevent another war.’⁴⁸

Writing to Beatrice in April 1942 he made an unusually explicit statement about his religious beliefs – a kind of Christian socialism which may have been shaped by his meeting with Arthur Prior (later a philosopher whom McCahon knew in Christchurch) – a topic seldom otherwise mentioned in letters to his family, though sometimes to Woollaston and Kennedy:

Now I must tell you I have discovered the real truth about Christ. Christianity is not what is found in churches. It is a living philosophy and truly revolutionary. And by far harder to live up to than any political scheme. Belief in Christ as a supernatural being is not necessary, to me it seems beside the point. Belief in Christ as a man living a philosophy not only preaching it is what is needed and it is the living that gives the Christian faith its power . . . You are certainly going to hear more of this from me. I shall leave you no way of escape.⁴⁹

The evangelistic certainty expressed here was not, however, a fixed position. Within a few months he wrote to Woollaston in a very different spirit:

What is it that stops me being Christian[?] I seem to have the desire but not the ability. I see now I never have been . . . Perhaps, like Bertrand Russell, I should give up this fight to believe in Christ. He said he had no peace & could do nothing until he cast aside all attempts to become a Christian . . . It has just struck me more forcibly than ever before that I can’t do this myself so that answers my own question. So what shall I become, or can I get rid of this disbelief[?]⁵⁰

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) was a famous agnostic and pacifist. Such questions of belief and disbelief were never finally settled for McCahon, but – to the undoubted benefit of his painting – were matters of continuous ongoing self-exploration and struggle.

Back in Dunedin by the end of May 1942, McCahon found jobs in pottery and paint-making factories. He was living at home with his father in Prestwick Street, while his mother was away in the North Island. He wrote to her and Beatrice: ‘I have sold myself to industry, I have nothing else that will sell.’⁵¹ He was having a hard time in Dunedin, a city he had come to dislike. He hated factory work; his relations with the Hamblett’s were problematic – they were unhappy about their daughter marrying someone with so few worldly prospects. Rev. Hamblett required him to save £80 before he would give permission for him to marry Anne.⁵² McCahon vented his feelings about the city in an August letter to Beatrice: ‘as I have said before & still say & know to be true, Dunedin is a dead city. So look out. Here it is hard not to come under this influence of old & dead living. I can never do it, therefore my periodic escapes to other parts.’⁵³ Middle-class expectations also rankled:

All that is expected of one is save & save[,] buy unwanted furniture and wait another three months, and then we’ll see . . . The moths have eaten holes in Mr. Hamblett’s suit of convention & to make patches he has woven cloth of his own, even tougher than the original worsted. This keeps out the cold but also the warmth & no part of him is uncovered . . . But I shouldn’t write like this of people. Actually I like both H[amblett] & Mrs H but find it very hard, never having met real convention before[,] to act in a manner pleasing to them.⁵⁴

His and Anne’s marriage eventually took place at St Matthew’s Church, Dunedin, on 21 September 1942; Beatrice and Noel Parsloe were married in the same city on the same day.

Pangatōtara, Wellington, Group Show, 1942–43

Soon after their wedding Colin and Anne went to Pangatōtara in the Motueka Valley where they spent the 1942–43 tobacco season, working for the McNab family. Lusk stayed for a week in February as did Hayman. Lusk and McCahon both painted versions of the Pangatōtara landscape which they gifted to one another. McCahon wrote: ‘Doris came up for the summer. Her painting of the Crusader and tobacco fields, now in the Auckland City Art Gallery, dates from that time. My painting [*Pangatotara landscape no. 1*, p. 59] looks down the valley: Doris’s looks upstream.’⁵⁵

As the tobacco season ended in March 1943 the McCahons were uncertain as to their next moves. Anne was pregnant with their first child. She is depicted sitting on the Motueka River bank while others frolic in the water in several drawings and paintings of the time. Colin wrote to his parents from Pangatōtara:

where we will eventually land up is unknown. Two more weeks here, to Mapua for sturmers [a variety of apple] and a rest. Anne is coming to Dn. me to Wellington to see what is what & to hear of the possibility of an Exhibition. S[am] W[illiams] is quite enthusiastic about this but it seems wisest for Anne to go home until all my strings are pulled and we know where we are. She is not feeling too pleased about it, nor am I.⁵⁶

Economic necessity forced some hard choices on Colin and Anne. While she was at her parents’ in Dunedin for the birth, Colin stayed briefly with the Woollastons. He enjoyed a day’s painting with Toss but lamented the difficulty of trying to combine a painter’s career with tiring rural work and living:

Yesterday . . . T[oss] & I went to Upper Moutere to paint. It is a lovely landscape to paint if only one was given the ability to do it . . . It seems all one can do is to keep one[’]s painting intelligence at least until such a time as there is some real leisure to be found & perhaps most important freedom from really exhausting work which leaves one exhausted even at weekends. It seems that why the majority of country people have no real interest in anything at all cultural to occupy their leisure time is because their physical exhaustion makes mental labour next to impossible.⁵⁷



[Carter Observatory, Kelburn], 1943,
pencil, watercolour on paper, 255 x 194 mm

Moving to Wellington, McCahon found work at the Botanic Garden (a job he disliked because of authoritarian Scottish management) and began looking for somewhere for him and Anne to live. At the Garden he was sometimes greeted by Prime Minister Peter Fraser passing through on his way to work each morning. American soldiers had a camp nearby before being shipped to the Pacific War. On one occasion he witnessed the disturbing scene of an escaping black American soldier being deliberately gunned down by military police.⁵⁸

At first McCahon shared a tiny flat with Patrick Hayman on The Terrace. Several people prominent in the city's cultural and intellectual life were becoming interested in his paintings, as he told his parents:

Anne will have told you of the sale of the harbour picture to Sam & Elizabeth [Williams]. I go there again on Sunday to meet the Beagleholes. Tonight to the Fleischls with Pat [Hayman] who wants to see the Pa Hill picture. And on Monday to Prof & Mrs Wood's place to look at their view of Mount Victoria. I am being lent one of their front rooms to paint from when I have the time, which won't be until I have found a place for us to live.⁵⁹

Sam Williams was a prominent theatrical designer and producer; John Beaglehole and Fred Wood were leading intellectuals who taught history at the university; Mario and Hilda Fleischl, both psychoanalysts, were Jewish refugees whom McCahon had first met in Dunedin; they had only recently moved to Wellington. Before long, another immigrant, the architect Ernst Plischke, had joined this circle of prominent Wellingtonians who recognised his exceptional talent and were keen to acquire his work.

The McCahons' first child, William, was born in Dunedin in July 1943; Colin went down in August and brought the family back to Wellington where they settled at 8 Espin Crescent, Karori. Colin was still not free of obligations to the military. He wrote to his parents about 'my last week's medical examination for the Army. The outcome is still vague. They demand a specialist's examination of my ear, when that will come off I don't know, they say soon . . .'.⁶⁰ The encouragement he was getting from knowledgeable Wellington friends led to a surge of confidence about his painting. 'Have been painting a lot & with definite progress. Now find I have moved several steps ahead of my art admiring friends. Early work now begins to sell to the élite[;] to me its commercial value even is very small indeed.'⁶¹ A few paintings have a Wellington subject, as with watercolour studies of the Carter Observatory.

In November 1943 McCahon again contributed work to the Group Show, their first exhibition (because of wartime restrictions)

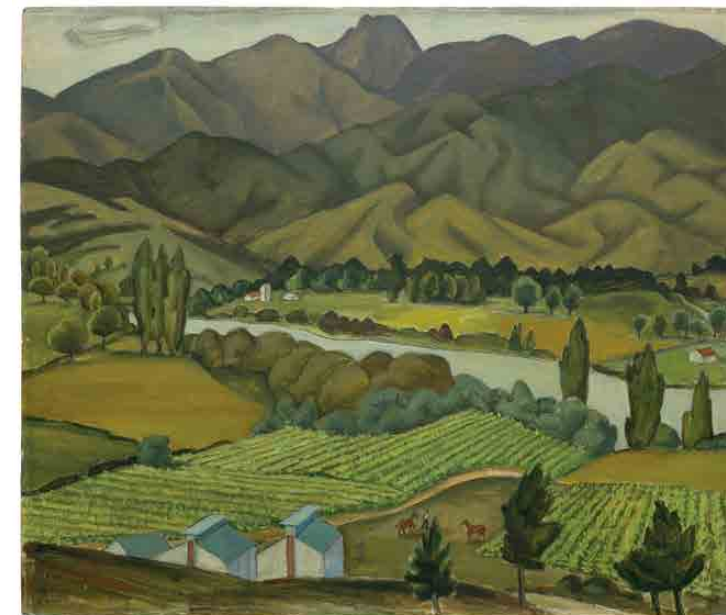
since 1940. He exhibited ten works: four oils, a watercolour and five drawings. In the *Press*, Charles Grignon, who also reviewed the 1940 show, linked McCahon with Woollaston: 'Two of the artists, Colin McCahon and M. T. Woollaston, are more than usually difficult to understand. . . . In Mr McCahon's pictures there is a satisfying handling of masses, especially in the study *Mother and Child*.'⁶² *Mother and Child* (whereabouts unknown unless it is *Red baby*, Hocken Collection, p. 69) was a study of Anne and William. (*Red baby* is inscribed 1945, but the date could possibly have been added later; McCahon thought this work showed his second child Catherine and said it was done at Renwicktown near Blenheim, but was puzzled at the presence of the chair, which was part of their furniture at Māpua; if the picture depicts William not Catherine the puzzle of the presence of the chair is explained.)

Three works which have the name 'Pangatotara' in their titles (*Pangatotara landscape no. 1*, *Pangatotara landscape no. 2*, and *Crusader from Pangatotara*, the first two oils, the third a watercolour) were among the best of some eighteen works in various media so titled (oils, watercolours, ink drawings) which McCahon completed in 1942–43. In these works he was wrestling with the inheritance of Cézanne as understood through conversation with Field and Woollaston and through his reading (Hayman gave him Cézanne's letters in 1942: 'Did I tell you [Pat] sent us Cezanne's letters (the same as Father got from the library)';⁶³ he also knew the 1937 Phaidon Press *Cézanne* with an essay by Fritz Novotny.⁶⁴ Comparison with Lusk's contemporaneous paintings of Pangatōtara show that she was more interested in the human and social aspect of the environment than McCahon (buildings, crops), but less experimental in her approach to perspective and the handling of space.

Road through bush (1942) was another Cézanne-influenced work; the curving road was a recurrent Cézanne motif, as in *Bend in the Road* (c. 1881) reproduced in the Phaidon book (now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts). *Road through bush* was probably the work referred to in November 1943: 'Prof. & Mrs Wood have bought a painting. At present it is at the Christchurch Group Show but when it comes back they get it & I a cheque for £10.10.'⁶⁵ Figure studies in the 1943 Group Show – rather awkward and tentative in manner – in part derived from Cézanne's celebrated *Bathers*. Some, a charcoal *Seated figure*, and several *Bathers* in pen and ink, were probably studies of Anne McCahon in the early months of their marriage.

In December 1943 McCahon told his parents of 'an impending move back to Nelson'; Wellington was proving too expensive:

We can get what sounds to be quite a good place at Mapua beach for 9/- a week. Living here is far too stressful



Doris Lusk, *Tobacco Fields, Pangatotara*, 1943, oil on cardboard, 457 x 533 mm.
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 1966/16/1,
gift of Colin McCahon, 1966



Pangatotara landscape no. 1, 1943,
oil on paper on board, 380 x 475 mm



Pangatotara landscape no. 2, 1943,
oil on hardboard, 593 x 393 mm

economically. There will come a time when new children are a necessity and I don't see how they can be paid for. And also I now feel all my energy must go to painting so any more distracting work is a waste of energy. So there is no longer anything to wait for here.⁶⁶

The conflict between painting and 'more distracting work' had been expressed before and would recur again.

Māpua, Renwicktown, Ruby Bay, 1944–45

Back in Māpua from mid-January 1944, the McCahons lived in a tiny two-room dwelling at Cactus Point so close to the sea that they sometimes got soaked. He told the Parsloes: 'In stormy weather we are drenched with sea spray. Everything becomes damp & sticky. William will drown himself as soon as he can walk.'⁶⁷ This dire prediction almost came true.

In May 1944 Anne took the baby to Renwicktown near Blenheim to stay with Beatrice Parsloe while her husband Noel was away in the air force. Eventually Colin joined them for eight weeks or so. As always, he enjoyed the new landscape, especially viewing the distant Richmond Range: 'Mount Fishtail, especially now – white with snow – is one of the loveliest mountains I have seen. The description used for the [Himalayas] "The tents of Abraham" suggests itself as a much more beautiful & suitable name. The suggestion of something permanent – a habitation – but moveable – which a tent is & a mountain is – by faith – is very wonderful.'⁶⁸

Back in Māpua by the end of July 1944, McCahon – his medical unfitness for active service having finally been established – was manpowered into McKee's orchard spray factory at Māpua, working a forty-eight-hour week which inevitably meant less time for painting. Their place at Māpua was too small for comfort and they searched for alternatives; late in the year they considered purchasing a 20-acre property with a house and orchard belonging to the Wells family on Pomona Road above Ruby Bay.

During 1944 the McCahons worked on several money-making projects, including, on Anne's part, illustrations for children's stories, two of which, *Brown Bears and the Manpower Man* by Peggy Dunningham and *At the Beach* by Aileen Findlay, were published in 1945; others for which she completed many drawings were abandoned when the Progressive Publishing Society in Wellington went broke in 1945. Anne and Colin also worked together on some delightful gouaches for children. Colin was responsible for the hills, Anne for the boats, trains and buildings. They held exhibitions of them in a Wellington department store and later at Modern Books in Dunedin in 1945 where they were reviewed positively in *Art in New Zealand*:

These pictures are the purest fun: red trains rushing into and out from tunnels through round green hills and over viaducts against clear blue skies; bright ships queuing up for passage through amazing canals or diligently unloading at detailed wharves; peoples and horses and aeroplanes overhead all very serious and busy . . . gay and clean and untrammelled like the imaginations of the very young.⁶⁹

Before moving to Ruby Bay early in 1945 the McCahons had confirmation of solo exhibitions for both of them at the French Maid Coffee House in Wellington, a facility which regularly used its walls for the display of art. In the absence of dealer galleries, it was one of the few spaces available for exhibitions. McCahon wrote: 'Had a letter today from the French Maid. Our pre-Christmas exhibition date was already taken, so now can either exhibit from Jan 16 . . . or after May 30. So decided on May 30 [–] a 3 week exhibition for each of us.'⁷⁰

McCahon told Kennedy in February 1945 that he was finding painting increasingly more difficult; as soon as he finished something it no longer pleased him. He had therefore decided to leave entirely to Hayman the selection of works for his exhibition. His ideas about what he valued in painting were changing, he said; Seurat and Picasso had 'fallen back', even 'Cézanne is less than the angels':

The real tradition comes from Giotto, Michelangelo, Gauguin. That is the tradition I try to cope with. It seems to me the Cézanne tradition begins with the Raphael and so on period which is itself not so fundamentally sound as the Giotto, Michelangelo tradition. I don't decry one to boost the other. I don't knock Cézanne off his pedestal, but lower it slightly, and am filled with great admiration at his integrity.⁷¹

This is a critical turn; the first inklings of what would emerge a couple of years later as his biblical paintings. He wrote again to Kennedy in March, claiming that he would be exhibiting not 'art' but 'work': 'Let's not be artists but painters, until "artist" as a word recovers its true meaning[,] falls from the empty heavens and joins in the earthly struggle.'⁷²

Soon afterwards he reported to Kennedy a kind of revelation – chiming indirectly with his renewed interest in the 'real tradition' of Giotto and Michelangelo – which would bear rich fruit some eighteen months later. Hamish Keith's summary and transcription of the lost original reads: 'Idea for painting – experience at work seeing men put up two power poles with connecting beam – a brilliant light – white flecked sky behind – the nearest thing I am likely to see to a Crucifixion group.'⁷³



French Maid Coffee House, Lambton Quay, Wellington. No paintings by McCahon are visible in the selection of works shown on the walls.
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, Evening Post Collection, 114/335/02-G

Suddenly, amid strenuous efforts to make the Pomona Road property more habitable, the Wellington show loomed as imminent. McCahon wrote: ‘The awful fact of having forgotten the great closeness of the Wellington show has kept me very busy indeed & poor Pat also, trying to get things mounted for me. He is also going to superintend the hanging which is a good thing.’⁷⁴

First solo exhibition, Wellington, 1945

The show at the French Maid Coffee House was selected and hung by Hayman; Colin crossed by boat to Wellington to attend the opening. After returning to Ruby Bay, he pronounced it – being hard on himself as always – ‘not altogether a success’: ‘Last weekend I spent in Wellington to see the exhibition. Very beautifully hung by Pat, but artistically not altogether a success, for the artist at least – the old work is pretty poor the only good thing – the most recent oil [*Ruby Bay*]. It will look poor in a few more months. Such is the process.’⁷⁵

In the same letter he reported their decision not to buy the Pomona Road property they were renting, again noting the division between painting and working:

We here have slowly come to the point where we have decided – or practically decided [–] not to buy this place. It still seems most desirable but I know in my case allegiance would be divided between painting & working here & working here would eventually come off worst but only after a time and energy wasting fight [to] do the right thing as it is generally seen.⁷⁶

A few days later he told his parents: ‘. . . the exhibition though quite unsold was evidently viewed with some interest. Now it goes to the Hutt Valley to another shop for 2 weeks more at Mr Singleton’s request.’⁷⁷ A. T. Singleton was the owner of the French Maid Coffee House in Lambton Quay; in June 1945 he opened another establishment in Lower Hutt called Smith’s Tea Rooms. McCahon made no reference to Anne’s scheduled exhibition at the French Maid; it seems not to have happened.

No catalogue of the Wellington exhibition survives and there were no reviews, but the contents can be partly reconstructed from McCahon’s correspondence both before and after the show. In November 1944 he asked his parents: ‘Ron O’Reilly . . . is buying the Motueka River bathers [p. 75]. Would you collect the other drawings from the Art society as soon as possible please[?] . . . Ron will call for them for a week’s loan, I may be wanting them soon . . . The portrait of Mavis Sharp is included especially for him to see . . .’⁷⁸ Presumably both *Bathers*, *Motueka River* and *Mavis* were included in the Wellington show. He requested another picture in December:

‘But as there is a possibility of having to send over [to Wellington] pictures right soon would you post up the woman on river bank just in case . . .’⁷⁹ *Woman on riverbank*, an oil painting of the figure sitting on the riverbank (in actuality his pregnant wife, Anne) in *Bathers*, *Motueka River*, had been in the OAS exhibition in 1943.

By 15 July 1945 the works from the Wellington exhibition had been returned and were sent on to Dunedin – some for the family; some for O’Reilly; some to go to Modern Books, including the children’s paintings.

Re the pictures

They are all marked on their backs except the childrens drawings.

2 drawings of D’Urville Island marked McCahon are for you to keep or give away as you please – they are the best of the drawings I think but swap them for others if you prefer.

The oil [*Ruby Bay*] is for Ron O’Reilly – he will call . . .

Then the drawings & the childrens stuff to M[odern] Books please. I shall write them.⁸⁰

Later in the letter, he singled out the oil on paper *Ruby Bay* (1945, p. 78) for special mention: ‘The Ruby Bay picture is the first landmark since the harbour picture [*Harbour Cone*] & as one would hope very much better than that. So I feel I must have moved forward a little since 1938–39. It is certainly better than average plumbing . . .’⁸¹

He made more extravagant claims for *Ruby Bay* in a letter to Kennedy about the French Maid show:

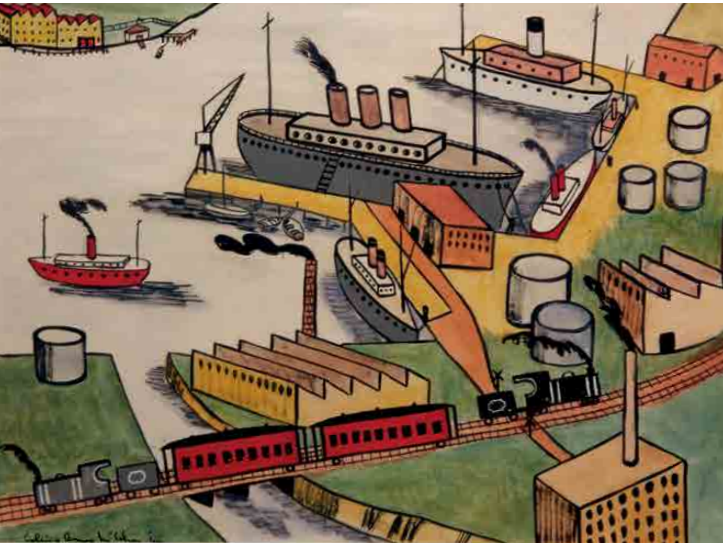
The Wellington exhibition looked very well . . . all the right people seemed impressed but by everything bar the only good painting there . . . Now I have given it to Ron O’Reilly for his collection. A landscape from outside the house, of Ruby Bay, and a landmark, the only really good work I’ve done since the harbour picture, and this so much better – I know I’ve not been wasting my time. This is the best picture yet painted in this country but how good that no one else knows it or how proud I would become.⁸²

This immoderate claim was slightly qualified the next day: ‘This on second thoughts does sound boastful but believe me I am only very little less convinced than I was last night. You may say “and what of Toss” and I reply Toss, in painting (drawing is separate) has no completed work. Nothing is carried far enough . . .’⁸³

What led McCahon so to single out *Ruby Bay*? Partly because it was the latest completed painting and had not yet faded in his



[Painting for children], 1944, ink, pen and watercolour on paper, 276 x 378 mm



[Painting for children], 1944, ink, pen and watercolour on paper, 278 x 378 mm

esteem as finished work was liable to do. He was very conscious at age twenty-five of not yet having reached his full potential. In the architectural firmness of its structure, the robust geometry of horizon, shoreline and trees, the confidence and distinctiveness of its colours and imagery, *Ruby Bay* was a pleasing step along the way, another ‘landmark’.

At least two *D’Urville Island* drawings were in the 1945 exhibition (p. 77); the island in the Marlborough Sounds is clearly visible from Ruby Bay and McCahon made several coloured drawings at different phases of the tide. Believing them to be ‘the best of the drawings’, he offered them to his parents. They were drawn on brown paper using crayons in one case and chalk and crayons in the other. He seems to have especially enjoyed the patterns on the sand made by the retreating tide with the low hills of the island visible beneath variable clouds.

Woman on riverbank (oil on hardboard, 1943), painted at Pangatōtara, is closely related to the several *Bathers* drawings and the tiny watercolour *Bathers, Motueka River* (1943) which includes both the figure on the bank and the bathers in the river. The McCahons left Pangatōtara in April 1943 when Anne was about six months pregnant. Is that why she was sitting on the riverbank instead of cavorting in the river? These two and probably the crayon and ink drawing *Mavis* – Picasso-like in its uncompromising distortion – were also shown at the French Maid.

Almost certainly also included at the French Maid was *Harriet Simeon* (1945, p. 76), a portrait in oils of an elderly Māori woman, published in the first *Yearbook of the Arts* (1945). In a handwritten note, now in the Auckland Art Gallery library, McCahon wrote: ‘This most beautiful & thoughtful Maori woman lived in a shack called Upper Hutt near our lower Hut at Mapua at Cactus Point. When the high tides really came we were on an island. Our William, very small and walking out to sea as a tide was coming in was rescued by Harriet. Goodness appears in hats.’⁸⁴ This anecdote of a near drowning is repeated in Gordon Brown’s book.⁸⁵ McCahon wrote about the portrait to Kennedy soon after its completion. ‘I feel Harriet has something. But the largeness of the Maori tragedy is not there as I’d hoped. The emotion from a painting should fill a room, should not exist on the painted surface but in front of it. The real picture is on the observer’s side of the frame.’⁸⁶ The elegantly hatted white-haired kuia’s head and torso dressed in grey and blue fill the frame, while the horizon between sky and sea bisects her face at mouth level. If the painting fails fully to transmit the ‘largeness of the Maori tragedy’ – a big ask for any portrait – it succeeds in conveying her grace, dignity and Gauguin-like serenity.

Also possibly included in the French Maid Show were *Patrick Hayman at Mapua* (c. 1944–46) and *Anne reading* (1945), a tiny

oil (185 x 175 mm) which was acquired by Fred and Eve Page in Wellington. Both works depict the subject reading books. These two works are a reminder of the importance of books and reading to the McCahons. They were avid readers of art books, poetry, biographies and modern fiction, and their letters often comment on their reading. For instance, in 1943 alone they read titles by Ethel Mannin, Herbert Read, Thomas Mann, Thomas Wolfe, Alex Comfort, Upton Sinclair, Ernest Hemingway, Christopher Isherwood and Gertrude Stein. McCahon also noted the inclusion of the New Zealand writers Brasch, Sargeson and Finlayson in John Lehmann’s periodical *Penguin New Writing*, but was highly critical of Ian A. Gordon’s *New Zealand New Writing* which he considered a shabby imitation of the English journal. He wrote to Noel Parsloe:

Thanks for the NZ New Writing. A good story by [G. R.] Gilbert I thought but what a cheek, how unoriginal . . . a kiwi for a penguin and you have a copy of the old original.

I agree with Pat [Hayman] there certainly are a lot of morons in this, our, God’s own country. And as for the new writing itself – bland. Quite uninspired. Ian A. Gordon need not feel proud.⁸⁷

McCahon was closely questioned by his sister about his reasons for abandoning the idea of buying the Pomona Road property and pursuing a full-time vocation as painter. He replied:

I am pruning my dreams & ideas to conserve energy for painting, have thrown off mountains of unnecessary interests . . . Property ownership is one – I am made without the right outlook on property and responsibility towards my family which demands a home . . .

So having certain knowledge that I am one of the very few who can paint well in this country I shall paint & conserve energy for that end by living with that end in view . . .⁸⁸

The self-belief is impressive but the conflicting responsibilities of the artist to his family and to his art were a recurring preoccupation for him at this time. His first solo exhibition seems to have settled this question in his own mind once and for all. His replies to his sister’s questions continued: ‘And the more bridges that burn the more important the main bridge must become . . . I do feel responsibility for my family but not in the way one is told one should . . . Security is not applied from outside but from within.’⁸⁹ Painting as his ‘main bridge’ anticipates the symbolism of *On building bridges (triptych)* (1952).

Spring, Ruby Bay (1945, p. 79), painted after his return from Wellington, may be the work mentioned to his parents in July: ‘Am starting on a large painting of the bay for you people . . .’.⁹⁰ McCahon’s note in his 1972 *Survey* conveys the sense of its being an important new beginning: ‘Back in Nelson and spring happened in Ruby Bay and we were there! Pear trees and chickens and gorse out in bloom and never again felt happiness. The small child painted the explosion in the sky.’⁹¹ *Spring, Ruby Bay* remained a personal favourite and part of his own collection.

Ruby Bay, Dunedin, Otago Peninsula, 1945–46

As 1945 ended, the long war finally over, plans were made to visit Dunedin for Christmas. It is likely around this time that McCahon received a commission from the Fleischls, to paint (for £30) a large panoramic landscape of Otago Peninsula. Years later, when Mario died in 1971 (Hilda had died earlier), McCahon wrote to Peter McLeavey:

Both Anne & [I] regret Mario’s going. We knew both Mario & Hilda when they first came to Dunedin & were becoming New Zealanders. They were among my first supporters, visited quite a lot & loved mother’s wholemeal scones (which were magnificent). They gave us a lot of useful help when we were in Wellington – advice about the kids & so on. We saw a lot of them then . . .⁹²

In Dunedin at Christmas time McCahon probably painted *The lamp in my studio* (c. 1944–46, p. 80), an innovative symbolic still-life of a naked light bulb reflected in a mirror. He stated in *A Survey* (1972) that the studio involved was in Dunedin, presumably in his old home at 24 Prestwick Street.⁹³ The painting affirms symbolically his newly confirmed commitment to the vocation of artist – to live by the light of imagination.

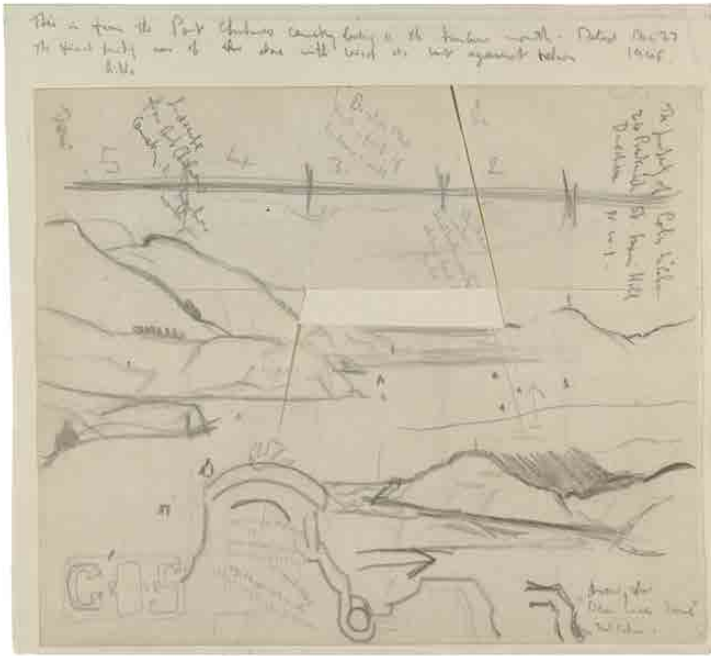
While in Dunedin that summer, McCahon made many drawings of the peninsula in preparation for the Fleischls’ commission. Most of these drawings – which years later were given to Kennedy and eventually by him to Hocken Collections – are undated; some may even date from the period prior to his painting *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* in 1939; others were probably done after his return south in the winter of 1946, but two are specifically dated 27 December 1945 and 1 January 1946. The first was of a gravestone in the Port Chalmers cemetery. An inscription on the drawing reads: ‘*This is from the Port Chalmers Cemetery looking at the Harbour mouth. The final painting was of this stone with bird etc but against Nelson Hills.*’ Dear Wee June (p. 138), with a background of Nelson hills, was painted in 1948 (discussed later). The drawing of the peninsula done on New Year’s



[Sketch of Ruby Bay house], 1944, brush, ink, pen on paper, 205 x 259 mm



Peninsula landscape with lamp, c. 1945–46, ink, pen on paper, 209 x 258 mm



Drawing for 'Dear Wee June', 1945, pencil on paper, 210 x 249 mm

Day 1946 has colour notes for the painting scribbled on it. It is loosely squared up for painting.

Singing Women (1945–46, p. 81) was also probably completed during this Dunedin visit. It already existed earlier, as McCahon asked his parents in December 1945: 'Have you my Singing Women or is it still in the Art Society reject room? Could you collect it if it is there?'⁹⁴ This suggests it had been rejected by the OAS in 1945 and worked on again in Dunedin, hence the double date on the title. It was later given to O'Reilly for his help with the Wellington Public Library exhibition in 1948. Colin wrote: 'Ron, would it please you to add the "Singing Women" to your own collection. I feel I owe you something for all your work and much more your enthusiasm at the time of the Wellington show. You said in one letter you had become fond of the "S. W." That painting is important to me, & I didn't intend it to go to England. If you have it I will still be able to see it.'⁹⁵ The reference to England relates to the fact that Hayman, when he returned to England in 1948, took with him (and had posted to him) several McCahon paintings, including *Dear Wee June*, *Hail Mary* (p. 151), *Triple Takaka* (p. 139), *The Family* (p. 119) and *The Valley of Dry Bones* (p. 115, all 1947–48) for possible exhibition in the UK; they were eventually repatriated in the 1980s and given by McCahon to various institutions. According to Gordon Brown, *Singing Women* depicted choristers observed during an evangelical concert in Dunedin.⁹⁶ Perhaps the memory of these Polynesian faces came to him after painting *Harriet Simeon*. Roland Hipkins must have been thinking of this painting when he wrote in the English journal *The Studio*: 'Colin McCahon's portrait heads are also compelling, but by force of a stark and forbidding primitive vision.'⁹⁷

Writing after they were back at Ruby Bay, Colin thanked his parents for 'having us for so long', and predicted their early return to Dunedin; he also reported that (the war being over) he had left the McKee factory at Māpua, and would spend the fruit season at Deci Wells' orchard, adding: 'We are almost certainly coming south again at the end of the season.'⁹⁸ By March 1946, they were already investigating housing possibilities in Dunedin, and began selling possessions in preparation. He told O'Reilly: 'I plan an assault on the Peninsula landscape – my usual from Peggy's Hill and others. I now see people in these landscapes.'⁹⁹ This telling reference to 'people in these landscapes' reminded him of a key scene he had earlier reported to Kennedy, revived as the subject for a possible mural:

Out of this grew an idea for a mural and I believe I have attained, through writing, a wall I knew of in the university library . . . I'm rather hazy as to just what to do. The idea of every mural telling a story does not really

appeal – but given the story who knows. I have thought of an equivalent to a crucifixion – or if you like the erection of a transformer at McKee's works Mapua . . .¹⁰⁰

Unfortunately, the mural idea came to nothing (though a drawing for it was exhibited at the 1946 Group Show), but he was clearly edging towards his first biblical paintings which followed a few months later, after he had finished the Fleischls' commission.

The McCahons had left Ruby Bay by the middle of May 1946. Colin wrote to O'Reilly from the Hamblett's' house in Stafford Street, Dunedin in July of continuing housing difficulties. He took on a variety of short-term jobs – house painting, working at the museum, building a permanent stage for the WEA – and working at the Fleischls' commission. A large number of undated drawings of the peninsula (at least twenty) must belong to the period May to July 1946 after the return to Dunedin. Often they are identified by particular locations: Mt Charles, Ravensbourne Wharf, Portobello, Harbour Cone, and so forth. After abandoning an attempt to paint *Otago Peninsula* for the Fleischls in situ (the wind blew the hardboard panel into a gully),¹⁰¹ his largest painting to date (887 x 2105 mm) was finished at Prestwick Street and sent to Wellington by the end of July (pp. 82–83). He immediately began another work of the same size and subject. He told O'Reilly:

The big harbour cone picture has left for Wellington – have done a very little more work on it and varnished it with wax – have had it at Modern Books for a week, it looked pretty good there. I hope you can see it in Wellington . . .

Am working very slowly on a development of the same landscape now – the same size – it should be much better than the other – there seems some uncertainty about this Wellington one. We shall see.¹⁰²

Although the second peninsula painting (made specifically for Kennedy) was not finally completed until 1949, an early version of it was done in 1946 and was shown at Modern Books in 1947, several months before the Fleischl commission was exhibited in February 1948 (pp. 144–45). McCahon worked on the painting for Kennedy at least twice more during later visits to Dunedin before he was satisfied with it. On 1 August 1948 he told Brasch: 'The large painting has quite changed – and is much better.'¹⁰³ The following year he wrote: 'Ask Rodney to please let me know how the Peninsula Painting seems to him when it comes back. I think he was somewhat disturbed to hear how much it had been repainted.'¹⁰⁴

Brasch, who lived with Kennedy in Royal Terrace from 1949 to 1955, came to think of Kennedy's painting as the 'finest



Otago Peninsula, 1946–49, oil on board, 890 x 2120 mm



Charles Brasch with *Otago Peninsula* at Royal Terrace, Dunedin, c. 1954, photograph taken by Hester Carsten. Brasch said: 'I suppose it is the finest landscape ever done in NZ.'

Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, MS-0996-002/466/001, Charles Brasch papers



[Sheds and scaffolding, Mapua],
c. 1943–45, pastel on paper, 476 x 396 mm
(possibly the work shown at the 1946
Group as *New Transformer at Mapua*)

landscape ever done in N.Z.’. When he was about to move into his own place in Heriot Row in 1955 he farewelled the picture in a journal entry:

Colin McCahon’s big painting of Otago Peninsula is one of the things I shall miss most when we leave here. It seems part of the house, it fits so perfectly in that long panel above the mantelpiece in the old sitting room, Rodney’s room, in colour close to the wallpaper. Colin has captured in it so remarkably the heroic proportions & brooding spirit of the place itself, but heightened & simplified; one feels that that is how God must have conceived the landscape in creating it, & Colin’s imaginative conception can properly be called inspired. I suppose it is the finest landscape ever done in NZ, to be thought of with [John] Buchanan’s Milford Sound, & nothing else.¹⁰⁵

The 1946 and 1946–49 versions of *Otago Peninsula* are of almost identical size. In the 1946 version the horizon is closer to the top of the picture and uninterrupted by hills, whereas in the later version the most distant hills loom above the horizon. The perspective in 1946 is more vertical (closer to a bird’s-eye view) and the peninsula hills appear flatter, whereas in 1949 the viewer is more conscious of depth and distance. The earlier version retains more surface detail – trees and hedges scattered on ridges and especially noticeable in the right foreground. In the later version the landforms are fewer, grander and more clearly articulated. In colour, too, the later work is richer, more monochromatic, but with greater tonal shifts between light and dark. In simplifying the landscape McCahon introduced more elements of repetition, creating stronger visual rhythms.

Landscapes McCahon had painted of Nelson and Tākaka in 1947–48 (discussed later) had taught him to rely less on topographical accuracy and more on memory and feeling than direct observation. The differences between these two great paintings are of a piece with McCahon’s general development as a landscape painter between 1946 and 1949. Each repainting had presumably taken the picture progressively further in this direction. The decade between *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* (1939) and the completion of Kennedy’s *Otago Peninsula* in 1949 had seen his progression from outstanding promise to full maturity as an artist.

Group Show 1946

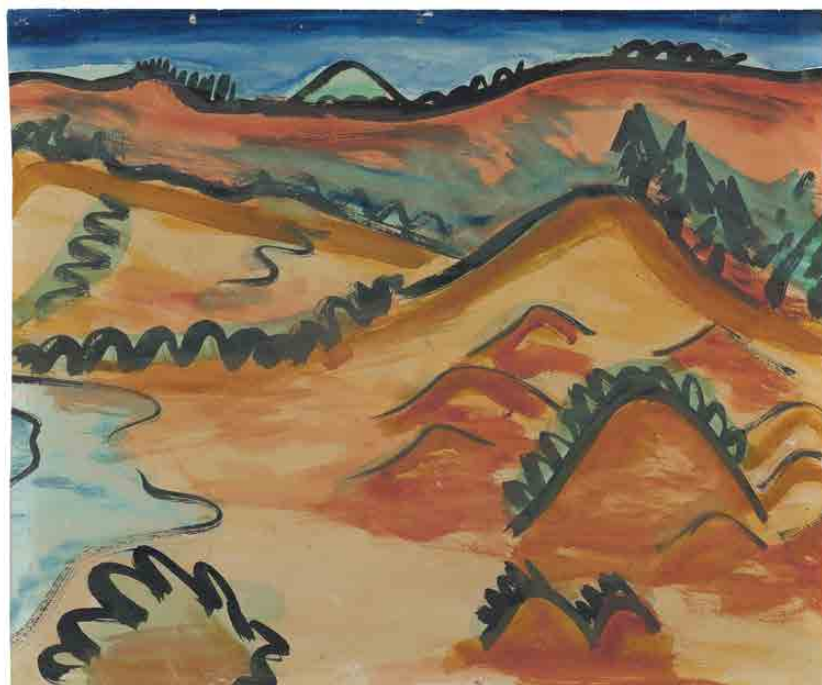
In 1946 the Group Show – back to regular annual exhibitions after wartime irregularities – was held in November. McCahon contributed nine works. The medium is not mentioned in the catalogue but the prices, all between 4 and 6 guineas, suggest that

his contributions were all drawings or watercolours. Titles indicate that most of them were made at Ruby Bay, prior to the move to Dunedin in May, including *Ruby Bay*, *Drive at Ruby Bay*, *D’Urville Island* and *New Transformer at McKee’s Works*. There were also several figure studies, including *Mother and Child*. *Drawing for a projected mural* (whereabouts unknown) was presumably a study for the library mural which never eventuated.

Few of these works can now be identified with certainty. As mentioned earlier, *Mother and Child* is possibly the work now known as *Red baby*. More speculatively, *New Transformer at McKee’s Works* could be the pastel called *Sheds and scaffolding, Mapua*, on the Online Catalogue, there (possibly incorrectly) dated c. 1941–43. If so, is it related to the scene mentioned to O’Reilly: ‘an equivalent to a crucifixion or if you like the erection of a transformer at McKees works Mapua . . .’? Was it possibly an immediate response to the scene (mentioned also to Kennedy) which later emerged as *Crucifixion (For Rodney Kennedy)* in 1947? If so, it is a vital precursor of the biblical series which began to emerge in Dunedin late in 1946.



Red baby, c. 1943–45,
watercolour on paper, 607 x 502 mm



Landscape from North end of Tomahawk Beach, c. 1935-37,
watercolour, pen and ink on paper, 255 x 305 mm

Otaio Gorge, 1938,
oil on cardboard, 348 x 401 mm



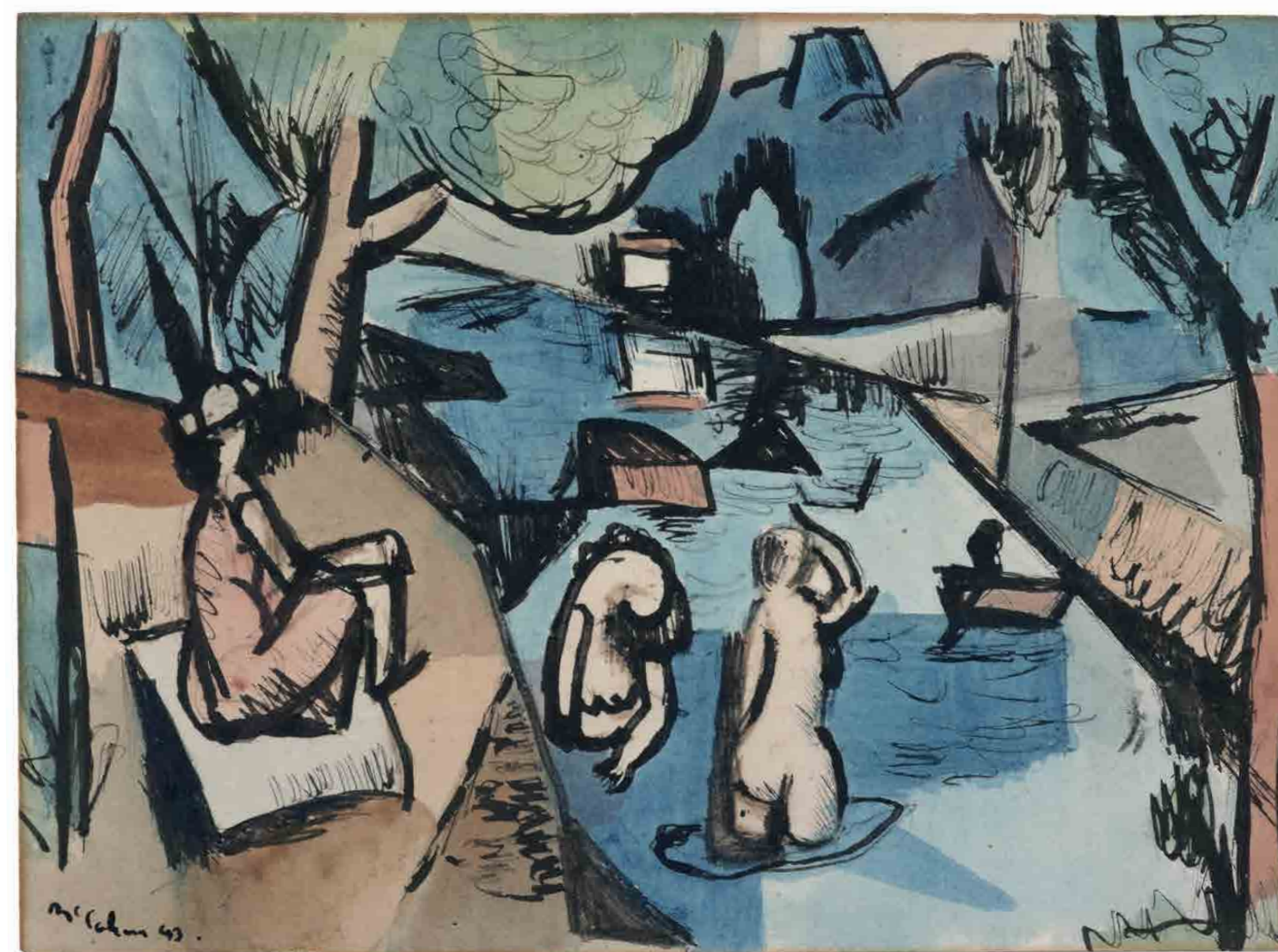
Elespie Forsyth, 1939,
ink and watercolour on plywood, 368 x 304 mm

Overleaf: *Harbour Cone from Peggy's Hill, 1939,*
oil on hardboard, 750 x 1333 mm





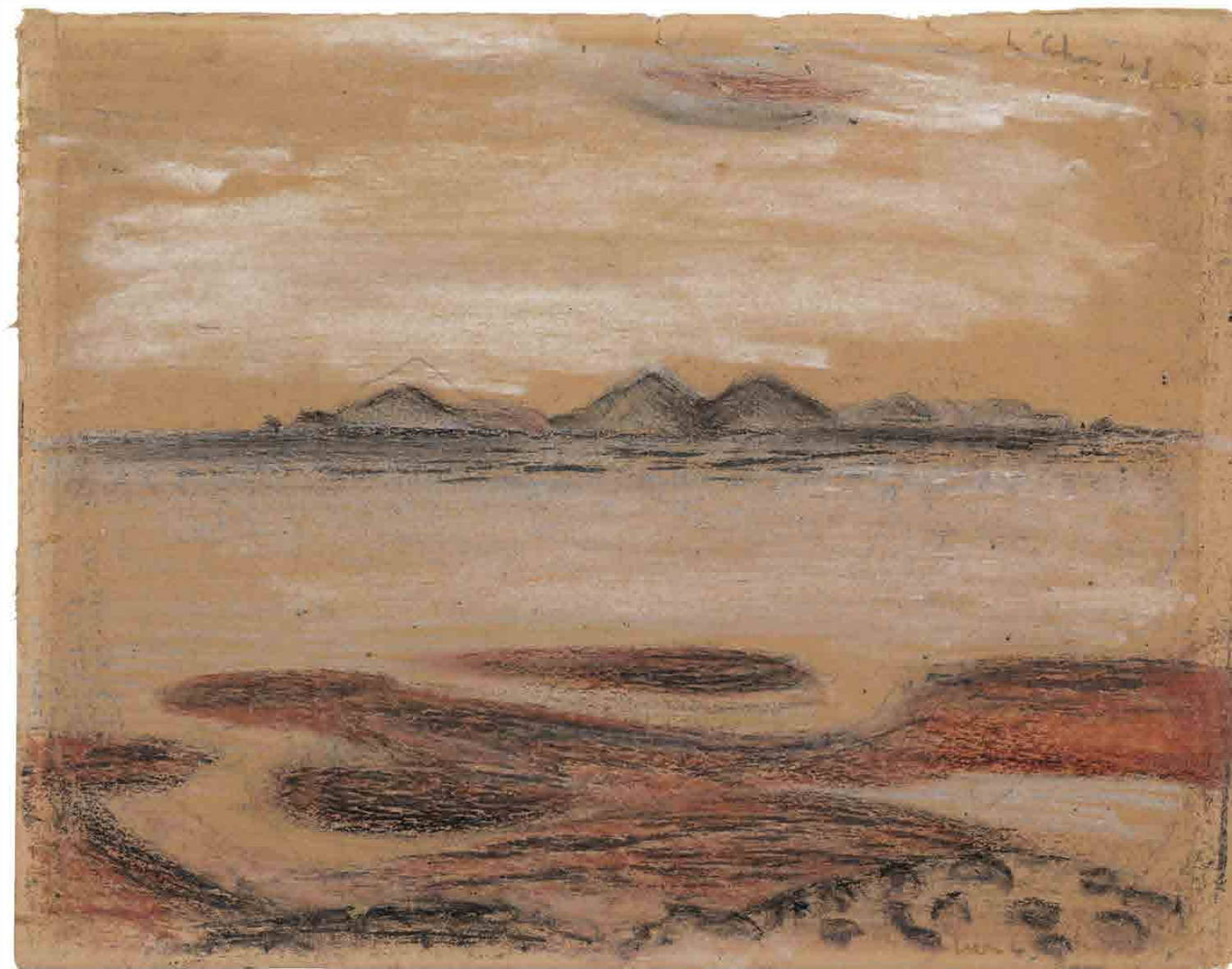
Nelson landscape, tobacco kilns, c. 1939-41,
oil on cardboard, 441 x 547 mm



Bathers, Motueka River, 1943,
ink, pen, watercolour on paper, 115 x 158 mm



Harriet Simeon, 1945,
oil on hardboard, 528 x 458 mm

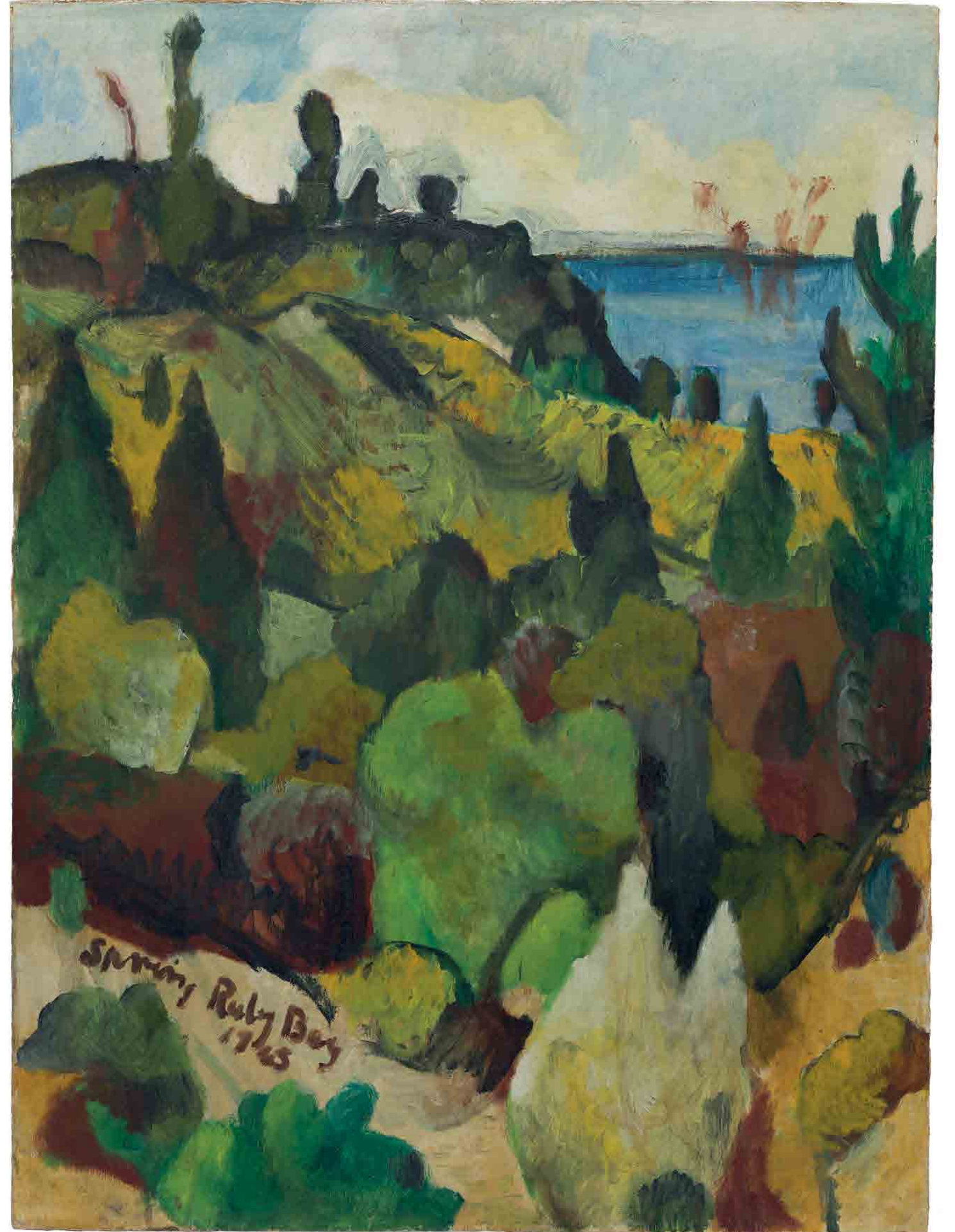


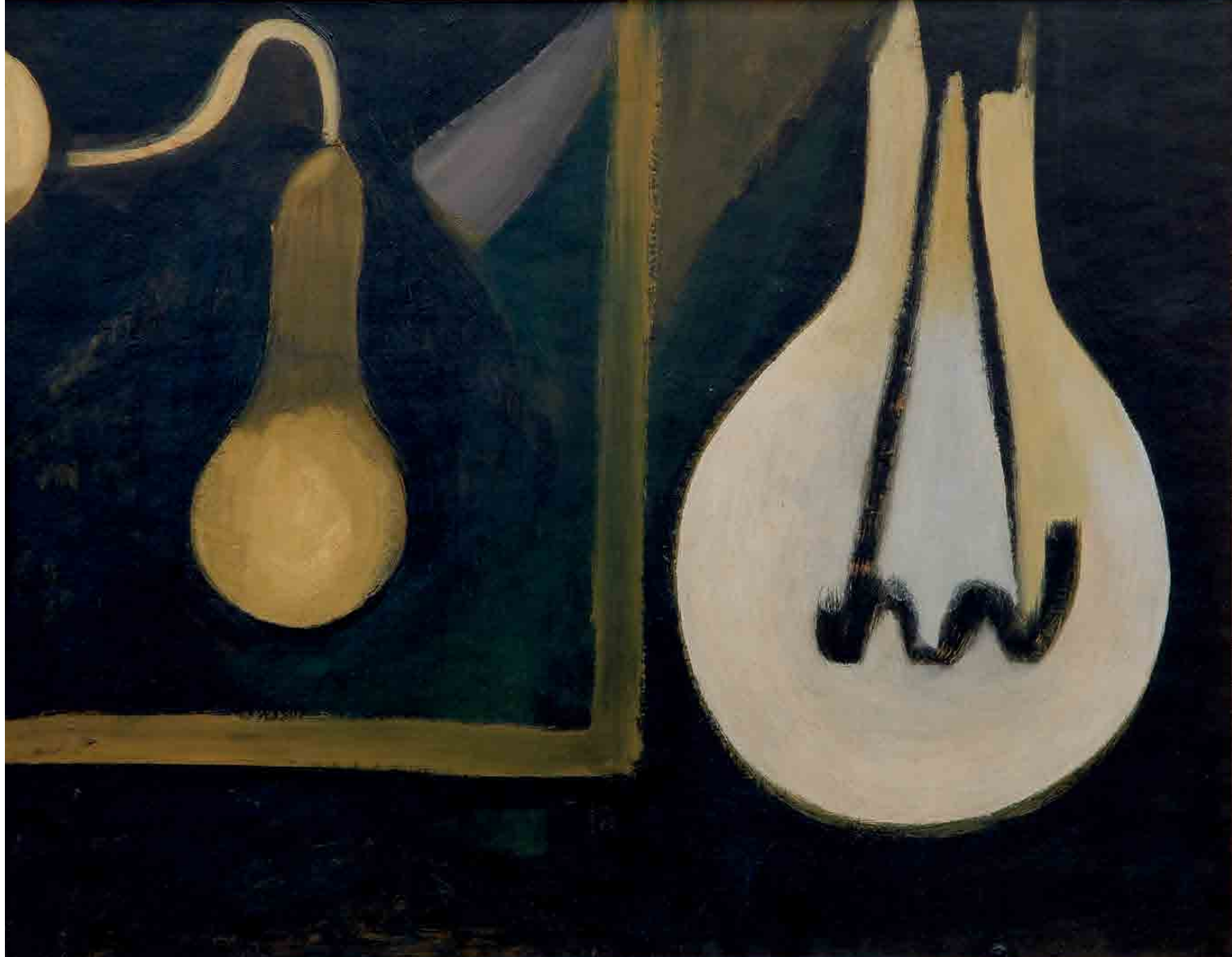
[D'Urville Island from Ruby Bay], 1945,
wax crayon and white chalk on brown
paper, 220 x 281 mm



Ruby Bay, 1945,
oil on paper, 394 x 473 mm

Spring, Ruby Bay, 1945,
oil on cardboard, 680 x 459 mm





The lamp in my studio, c. 1944–46,
oil on cardboard on hardboard, 511 x 646 mm



Singing Women, 1945–46,
oil on paper on board, 420 x 470 mm



Otago Peninsula, 1946,
oil on hardboard, 887 x 2105 mm

