

amongst heterosexual women and other (usually Bohemian) sympathisers — the poet James K. Baxter among them. For the most part, however, ‘preliberation’ seems to presume a homosexuality that was, in Millar’s estimation at least, largely covert and unsatisfying. ‘Mainstream’ and ‘homosexual’ cultures remain diametrically opposed to one another, and these monoliths elide any question of the ambivalence or interplay that must exist within any regime of power.

While Millar’s account is a literary biography and not an academic history *per se*, his evocation of period and place is conspicuous for its disconnection from much local and international historiography. Reflecting his own disciplinary background, perhaps, Millar makes better use of literary-historical works — Peter Wells and Rex Pilgrim’s *Best Mates*, for example — but largely ignores the now burgeoning field of the history of sexuality, especially Chris Brickell’s *Mates and Lovers*. This new wave of research has reconsidered prior conceptions of New Zealand’s sexual past and emphasized the range of possibilities open to individuals as they sought social and sexual contact in the years before 1972. While it may be tempting to see Pearson as the ‘twentieth-century New Zealand everyman’, his own experience cannot be taken as representative of all preliberation lives. Although it is fair to say that Pearson’s life was sometimes far from positive, the conventions of biographical writing mean that our view of this past is only ever glimpsed through Pearson’s very particular perspective. Looking broadly at both period and place may have allowed Millar to contextualize this process more thoroughly, locating Pearson less in isolation and more firmly within the broader community of people to which he belonged.

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Towards a Promised Land: On the Life and Art of Colin McCahon. By Gordon H. Brown. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2010. 216pp. NZ price: \$79.99. ISBN 978 1 86940 452 9.

GORDON BROWN MET COLIN McCAHON in 1952 and they became close lifelong friends. Over the years they were also work colleagues: Brown curated exhibitions of McCahon’s art, and wrote a book and essays on it. And the two discussed works in progress. In other words, Brown has an ‘insider’s’ knowledge of the art and career of this painter, the most celebrated in New Zealand’s art history. Brown’s ‘couldn’t-be-better-informed’ perspective, then, is unique among the many writers who have engaged with the ‘Master’s’ oeuvre.

Towards a Promised Land (a play on the title of a very well-known 1948 McCahon painting) is the product of many years looking at, as well as thinking, talking and writing about, his work. A succinct introduction frames 16 chapters, ten of which are revised versions of previously published pieces of varying lengths, one of just two pages.

The book is an anthology, not a comprehensive survey. It addresses a selection of aspects of the artist’s work and career — McCahon and theatre, McCahon and Woollaston (another pioneering New Zealand modernist), for example — as well as major series of paintings and individual works. Brown gives particular emphasis to the religious and biblical dimensions of McCahon’s art, including his involvement with Christianity. Having studied theology, the author is probably better equipped to do this than any other writer on McCahon. He also tactfully addresses matters that most others have avoided, and the consequences of which they have perhaps even denied. Brown does not shy away from the destructiveness of McCahon’s heavy drinking, his increasingly severe memory loss from the late 1970s, and his health decline and brain damage. He implies that all this must have affected the quality of McCahon’s painting.

Towards a Promised Land is written in a matter-of-fact, clear and unsentimental manner. While a very 'personal' book, it is not a hagiography, unlike quite a lot of (indeed, too much) other writing about McCahon. The book benefits, too, in reproducing a selection of Brown's excellent photographs of the artist, including the cover image from 1968, in which McCahon, wearing a checkerboard-patterned jersey, looks back intently at his friend and writer, and now at us too. Seventy-five paintings and drawings are reproduced. Their quality is very good, as is the book's design, a credit to the outstanding work of Katrina Duncan, the Auckland University Press's in-house designer.

Perhaps curiously, the book does not have a bibliography. Nor, it would seem, if the notes are indicative, has the author paid much attention, in assembling the essays for publication, to the writing on McCahon by leading academic art historians and critics like Francis Pound, Wystan Curnow, Tony Green and Laurence Simmons. I will leave to others to decide whether this is a weakness or a strength in the often-contentious world of McCahon scholarship and publishing. Overall, then, we have a good-looking, intensively informed, most readable production, typographically very clean, with the odd exception of the famous pioneer abstract painter, Hans Hoffmann, spelt as both 'Hoffman' and 'Hofmann'.

Some might well ask whether any more writing on McCahon's is really necessary or desirable at the moment — though I know of two other book-length manuscripts looking for interested publishers. While McCahon *is* a major, even towering, figure, that evaluation is largely restricted to New Zealand, and to a secondary extent to Australia, where his work has several influential admirers. While there was an exhibition and substantial catalogue, *A Question of Faith: Colin McCahon*, from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2002, and exhibitions in Britain about 20 years ago, McCahon's art has never gained traction or attracted much interest there or elsewhere in the Euro-American art 'world'.

Does that suggest that much of his work is either over-rated or too culturally specific to Australasia to be understood and appreciated elsewhere? Certainly everything McCahon's paintbrushes touched did not turn to gold — there is quite a lot of dross which is not seen as such either by the mythologizers or in the art market. And more than a few of his paintings are so idiosyncratic, even nutty, in terms of content and 'message' that they were lost on Europe and America, with their very different histories. McCahon and his art have been mythologized here, which is not to say that he did not produce some wonderful work. However, outstanding New Zealand artists of his generation — notably Milan Mrkusich, Don Peebles and Gordon Walters — have until recently received much less publishing attention. Consequently, the overall picture of twentieth-century New Zealand art history has been skewed and distorted.

It is probably only here that an otherwise modernist painter of so much religiously oriented work has received such scholarly attention and praise. Brown is right to focus on these paintings, as was Francis Pound in his *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930–1970* (2009). For many people, though, the religious dimension is the least compelling aspect of McCahon's painting; something that is very secondary to the formal and painterly, as well as imaginative and social, qualities of his best work. For McCahon was a central protagonist in the mid-to-late-twentieth-century evolution of New Zealand from a 'small-town', parochial, often xenophobic, culturally backward society, into one increasingly outward-looking, urban and cosmopolitan. He was also an exemplary avant-gardist, even if it remains unclear to what extent he acted out the stereotype of the alienated, misunderstood, tortured artist; a nineteenth-century 'romantic' type, which did not find a place in New Zealand until after World War Two.

It can be difficult to *really* see McCahon's work without the myth-making and other romanticizing baggage — as well as the dollar signs of the contemporary art market — getting in the way. But Gordon Brown has endeavoured to see clearly and locate the art in the actual day-to-day conditions of McCahon's life and beliefs. Perhaps problematically, McCahon was loath to provide interpretations of his paintings, preferring to leave that almost entirely

to the viewer. While, of course, the intentions of an artist do not necessarily determine the primary meanings that paintings have in particular social and cultural contexts, McCahon's choice has led to readings of his work ranging from the ingeniously far-fetched to those disconnected from the earth. For instance, in a conference paper about five years ago, his *The Promised Land* (1948) was embedded in a perspective featuring the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 and its consequences for the Palestinians! Brown's approach is sensibly different: to characterize the paintings in terms of their demonstrable contexts of use and interpretive community, and a lifetime's knowledge.

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Home: Civilian New Zealanders Remember the Second World War. By Alison Parr. Penguin, Auckland, 2010. 292pp. NZ price: \$50.00. ISBN 9780143203841.

ALTHOUGH MILITARY HISTORY is a perennial favourite in the nonfiction bestseller lists, the less dramatic stories of the home front have been relatively ignored. Alison Parr's *Home* explores the war experiences of New Zealanders who stayed behind during the Second World War. This book uses an oral history methodology and aims to give voice to the stories of ordinary men and women. An introductory chapter outlines New Zealand's involvement in the Second World War both at home and overseas. The chapters that follow are organized thematically around different aspects of the home front experience, ranging from wartime recreation and relationships to the experiences of conscientious objectors and the ongoing effects of war on returned servicemen.

An award-winning interviewer, Parr based *Home* on 19 in-depth oral histories that have been deposited in the Oral History Archive at the Alexander Turnbull Library. Her authorial presence is non-intrusive. Each chapter is introduced with brief explanatory notes, highlighting themes and linking together related material. Yet considerable work has gone into editing transcripts so that the narrators' voices are readable and provide a valid representation of their conversational styles. *Home* succeeds in giving evocative insights into what it was really like to live through the Second World War in New Zealand. The narrators' words are by turn funny, informative, practical, surprising and heartbreaking. Their immediacy is sometimes startling. For example, Marian Beech describes taking a bath after hearing of her brother's death in a plane crash: 'I got into a bath the next morning at my mother's place and they had a califont and the califont made a funny sound like the wind whistling and I remember lying in that bath and I was in tears. And that whistling in the califont, just like a plane. It was like an aeroplane. I'll never forget that. I just couldn't get out of that bath fast enough.' (p.211)

At times Parr devotes considerable space to individual stories. In 'Mae and Bill' (pp.270–3), for example, Mae describes how her husband experienced ongoing depression, nightmares and flaring violence as a result of his wartime experiences. Her words offer a powerful insight into the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Home provides fresh perspectives on the home front and complicates well-worn stereotypes. The American 'invasion', for example, is popularly associated with glamour, romance, free nylons and 'jealous Kiwi blokes'. Parr covers these themes, but also highlights the role of Kiwis in providing a family away from home for lonely and war-weary US troops. The oral histories reveal that wartime romances were as much about patience and level-headed restraint as passionate farewells. They also highlight the diversity of individual experiences. While some narrators were very fearful during air raid rehearsals, others found them a bit of a lark. The use of oral testimony in *Home* reminds us that people's experiences of historical events are mediated by their individual situation, personality and relationships.

One shortcoming of this book — from an academic historian's point of view — is