

Sketch for TEAL is McCahon's study for the 1953 *International Air Race* commissioned in 1952 by the national airline, Tasman Empire Airways Limited, to commemorate a forthcoming air race from London to Christchurch. TEAL, who no doubt had expected something more naturalistic, was not happy with the final painting, though they did honour the commission by paying the artist. After a long and ominous silence from the company, in August 1953 it was reluctantly announced that the painting would be displayed in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. As R N O'Reilly wrote to McCahon: *Everyone is most relieved the thing has broken at last*. The finished painting, along with four preliminary studies and *Sketch for TEAL* were exhibited as McCahon's entry to the 1953 group show. McCahon's friend, the writer John Summers wrote to congratulate McCahon, telling him that *International Air Race dwarfed all else and was more startling and powerful than I'd expected*. TEAL took possession of the painting in Auckland, and transferred it to Wellington, where it was put into storage. Finally the painting was sawn up, so the story goes, and turned into a packing case.

There is nothing in New Zealand landscape painting quite like Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, or much in New Zealand art like the Italian Futurists' celebrations of technology and the machine: there are few triumphant emblems of an awesome modernity. Rather, there is a strong anti-technological strain, and the New Zealand regionalist tends to suppress or downplay any too emphatic signs of technological modernity in the landscape. The steel viaduct of McCahon's *On Building Bridges*, 1952, is one of the few major exceptions. Even there, the triptych format, in that it recalls the same format of the medieval and Renaissance altarpiece, frames the land with a certain anti-modern, medievalising and Christian sacredness.

McCahon's *International Air Race* of 1953, commissioned by Tasman Empire Airways Limited, and later destroyed by its unhappy commissioners, might seem, with its racing jets, another important exception to the anti-technological rule of New Zealand landscape painting. However, it was provoked, in all probability, only by TEAL's special requirements. Significantly, the other aeroplanes which fly through McCahon's art, appear in a Christianised and so medievalised, context. *There is one above the barbed wire behind the biblical Paul, in I Paul to You at Ngatimote*, 1946, which, as a modernist machine of war, flying into the parabolic line-and-ball symbol of atomic technology, signifies technological modernity in its most negative aspect.

An aeroplane provides the window format of *Flight From Egypt*, 1980, a Christian allegory of the search for the Promised Land. Other aeroplanes are transubstantiated into a cross - a device borrowed from the great Russian abstractionist, Malevich, or a sign of the soul flying from the body at the moment of death, in the *Jet Out Over Muriwai* series of drawings. McCahon's aeroplanes, with the exception of the TEAL commission, are invariably turned into a Christian symbol. It is significant, too, that such celebrations as there are of technology and the machine in New Zealand art tend mostly to be made by painters infected by the modern in style - it is as though stylistic modernity and technological modernity are accepted as one and the same. *International Air Race* was a somewhat cubist picture, provincially mild though it is, and based on the still only proto-cubist works of Picasso and Braque, yet leaves the realism of the regional realist behind.

Text assistance from *The Invention of New Zealand; a Nationalist Mythology in Art and Letters: c. 1930 - c. 1970*, Francis Pound



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COLIN MCCAHERN

Sketch for TEAL, 1953
Oil on board 52.6 x 66.7
Signed & dated 1953

\$80,000 - 120,000

Provenance:
Private Collection, Auckland
Fine New Zealand and Foreign Paintings, Photography and Prints, Webb's 14/12/1998, Lot No. 54

Reference:
The Invention of New Zealand; a Nationalist Mythology in Art and Letters: c. 1930 - c. 1970, Francis Pound 2010

McCahon database
Record number cm001464