

**“BY WRITING AND EXAMPLE”: THE BAXTER EFFECT**

**John Newton**

**Introduction: fame and “folk”**

When James K. Baxter left the literary straight-and-narrow to immerse himself in the Jerusalem commune — in a process which transformed him into a media icon who for many may be only incidentally a writer — he created a problem which our literary culture has not yet remotely assimilated. The Baxter of the Jerusalem era achieved what for a New Zealand poet remains unrivalled celebrity. And in this self-reinvention he discovered a path, if not precisely *in* his poetry then *through* it, to the public vocation to which he had always aspired. The poet emerges as a social activist. The writings that record this transformation have been well enough received; beginning with Karl Stead in his influential *Islands* essay of 1973, plenty of readers have been glad to affirm the Jerusalem poetry as his crowning achievement.<sup>1</sup> The extent of his popular exposure, however, is apt to be viewed as an irritant and a distraction. For instance Stead writes: “A haze of indiscriminating feeling surrounds Baxter . . . . To the young . . . he has become a culture hero, and if his poems were much less remarkable than they are I suspect his youthful disciples would not know it and would admire them quite as much.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in literary circles at least, the activism itself has gone largely unanalysed, sidelined in deference to what his biographer Frank McKay calls the more “lasting fruit” of his poetry and prose.<sup>3</sup>

This ambivalent response to late Baxter was rehearsed at the time of the poet’s death by his one-time sponsor, Allen Curnow:

**A Refusal to Read Poems of James K. Baxter at a Performance in Honour of His Memory in Cranmer Square, Christchurch**

Jim, you won't mind, will you,  
if I don't come to your party?  
One death is enough, I won't kill you  
over again, ritually,  
being only one other poet  
who knew you younger and never better,  
I would hardly know under which hat or which crown  
to salute you now —  
bays, or myrtles, or thorns,  
or which of them best adorns  
that grave ambiguous brow.

The quandary's mine, yours too,  
Jim, isn't there always too much  
we don't understand, too much that we do?  
Winged words need no crutch,  
and I've none for you.

*March 1973*<sup>4</sup>

Nothing could be further removed from the mandarin reserve in which Curnow prefers to cloak himself than Baxter's unabashed personalism and the vigour with which he enters into the construction of his own mythology. Thus, behind Curnow's protestation of confusion — that he wouldn't know whom he was talking to: the poet (beneath his crown of bays), the self-confessing lover (myrtles), or the self-styled messiah — is a deeper expression of distaste for Baxter's populist histrionics. In Baxter's self-projection apparently there is a misunderstanding of how poetry works. Another elder, Denis Glover, voices the same complaint — "Jim, utter honesty / Demands no publicity," he writes in his poem on Baxter's tangi<sup>5</sup> — seconding Curnow's more insinuating version: "Winged words need no crutch." Of course Curnow's response comes as little surprise — he was never in a hurry to give up his part in their arm-wrestle of the Fifties and Sixties — while Glover makes no bones at all about his personal antipathy.<sup>6</sup> But even an ally like Alistair Campbell, recalling the tangi in milder terms, still backs away from this late Baxter phenomenon: "I wanted to say, 'Goodbye Jim — you old bastard! Everyone seems to have forgotten you were a poet. But I, your old cobber, haven't forgotten . . . .' And I would

have named all the writers and poets who had come to Jerusalem to pay him their final tributes. But I didn't say anything. I left him with young friends . . . ."<sup>7</sup> In subsequent decades the note which is sounded here echoes repeatedly in one form or other: if we want to do justice to Baxter the poet we need to extricate him from the celebrity which envelops him.<sup>8</sup>

By now, though, it's clear that this strategy is not working. In a passage to which I find myself returning frequently, from his Penguin introduction of 1985, Ian Wedde writes that (at least in a Pākehā context) Baxter "is probably the nearest we have come this century to a 'folk poet' whose circumference our reading does not seem able to reach."<sup>9</sup> Twenty years on, that we haven't reached Baxter's "circumference" seems more than ever an understatement. In fact, his critical profile now seems oddly ambiguous. His sixteen pages make him the most generously represented poet in the Penguin anthology ("This anthology is as much 'post-Baxter' as it is 'post-1960.'")<sup>10</sup> And yet this definitive status makes him difficult to accommodate, and both the contemporary Penguin anthology (1989) and *Big Smoke: New Zealand Poems 1960-1975* (2000) depend for their fresh perspectives on omitting Baxter entirely.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, effective critical commentary seems to be more-or-less becalmed. Apart from the *JNZL* special issue in 1995 (which gave us among other things the first airing of Kai Jensen's Jungian thesis), and allowing of course for the odd notable exception, there has not been a lot to refresh the conversation since the flurry of activity that followed the Weir *Collected Poems* of 1979.<sup>12</sup> None of this might be so unusual were it not for the fact that it goes hand-in-hand with that sense of Baxter's stature and, indeed, of over-exposure.<sup>13</sup> In other words, we seem to be faced with the paradox of a figure who is somehow too famous to write about.

If we follow Wedde and think of Baxter as a "folk poet," what light exactly does it shed on this impasse? As various readers have pointed out, Baxter's work, perceptibly from about 1960, and then more explicitly in the Jerusalem phase, becomes more informal (or in Wedde's appropriate terms, more "demotic").<sup>14</sup> I'm not convinced that Baxter becomes less moralistic. But he does become more conversational, certainly, and (within broad high-brow limits) more accessible. At the same time, there has always been a significant dimension of his verse given over to bawdry and balladry. These factors add up to a certain

“popular” inflection in Baxter’s work, something which must at least partly account for the fact (or at least the plausible supposition) that Baxter’s verse is more widely read, taken to heart, and taken to memory, than the work of any other New Zealand poet. This inflection challenges the formalist protocols, inherited from modernism, which have dominated textualist criticism for as long as Baxter has been written about. Modernist reading, as epitomised in the New Criticism, takes its rationale from the difficulty, obscurity and ambiguity of the literary text. But the openness typical of “folk” poetry denies it this foothold (“Lament for Barney Flanagan” may be a more successful poem than “Henley Pub,” but “Henley Pub” is easier to analyse, or teach). Moreover, it also raises the spectre of a different kind of readership, somewhere else, enjoying the poem differently — a dimension of poetic experience more receptive to ethnography than to formalist hermeneutics.

To some extent, then, the poems’ folk or demotic qualities help to account for a paradoxically difficult critical assignment. But I’m not convinced that these textual qualities in themselves explain satisfactorily the problem of Baxter’s “circumference.” One way ahead might be to couple the term “folk” with its dubious relative and think about Baxter also as a “cult” poet — expanding the “folk” to acknowledge a “cult” valency, or simply dissolving the boundary between them. What this would reference, as I understand it, is an audience of the kind that Stead depreciates, drawn to Baxter’s writing by his person or his legend, and by implication engaging with the text itself in a partial, vestigial, or untutored way. But “cult,” imposed as an academic label, patronises reader and poet alike. And in doing so it implies an erroneous distinction, blaming this *ad hominem* seduction on an unreliable readership; this closes down the more challenging thought that *everyone*, in fact, may read Baxter naively, the trained and the untrained reader alike, in as much as we all now encounter the text — at least to some extent — through the filter of Baxter’s fame. So for now I propose to leave both terms aside, but without losing focus on the problem at which they gesture: how do we negotiate the work of a poet whose impact is so demonstrably outreaches the things we are able to account for textually? If we wish to speak seriously about Baxter’s scope, we need to grapple not just with the text but with what we might call the *paratext* — with the way in which his public persona mediates our reading, and with what that persona means and does in a cloudy arena of lived experience

beyond the ambit of textualist criticism. The “Baxter effect” which I am pursuing in this essay emerges when we allow for the integration of these textual and “other” elements: when we cease trying to rescue the text from the legend, or the poet from that “haze of indiscriminating feeling.” In particular, Baxter’s fame, as the paratextual datum *par excellence*, is treated here not as a distraction but as an incitement to analysis. What, for example, are its historical coordinates? How does Baxter deploy it? Why does it make his fellow writers so uncomfortable? And rather than try to uncouple the poems from the figure of their over-publicized author, I want to consider the rhetorical continuities that bind the two together in the service of Baxter’s romanticism. While I make no claim that such an approach threatens to discover the poet’s full reach, it may clear a space in which the question of his scope can be framed in more comprehensive terms.

### **Confessional legends**

At the beginning of March,  
nineteen-seventy-one,  
I’ll open, if you like,  
my guts for the world to see . . . .

(“He Waiata mo taku Tangi”)<sup>15</sup>

Though I’m not aware that anyone has spelled this out explicitly, by any reckoning the Baxter of the Jerusalem period is a “confessional” poet.<sup>16</sup> What may not be so self-apparent, however, is the extent to which he participates in the broader confessional irruption in Anglophone poetics. Born in 1926, Baxter is the same age as Allen Ginsberg; Anne Sexton was born in 1928, Sylvia Plath in 1932. Accepting that the height of the confessional moment occurs between, say, “Howl” (1956), or *Heart’s Needle* and *Life Studies* (both 1959), at one end, and at the other the death of Anne Sexton in 1974, then the Jerusalem poems of 1969-72 lie close to its historical centre of gravity. Never exactly a movement or school, Confessionalism is better described as an impulse: a more-or-less independent discovery in response to a shared or related set of historical determinants. That said, however, if the impulse has a centre then it’s generally agreed to be in Robert Lowell’s poetry workshop at Boston University where, in 1959, his students included Sexton and Plath. Now Lowell, of course, also “taught” Baxter himself, who in this sense

belongs in that confessional context, not just historically but also genealogically.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, Baxter's most intensely confessional mode does not resemble Lowell's in any technical sense; on the other hand, nor does Plath's. And while Baxter was always a self-dramatising poet, whose confessional inclinations may not have needed much encouragement — especially when he was so thoroughly immersed already in the sacramental Catholic model<sup>18</sup> — it seems likely enough that Lowell's example in *Life Studies* emboldened him to take the decisive extra step: from the verse letters to Maurice Shadbolt ("Pig Island Letters"), let's say, to the verse letters to Colin Durning ("Jerusalem Sonnets"). However, the point of proposing that we think about Baxter as a country member of the confessional inner circle is not to try to isolate a shared debt to Lowell, but rather to draw attention to the strikingly similar problems that Baxter and Plath, in particular, have presented to their critics.

In a famous review entitled "Poetry as Confession" M.L. Rosenthal wrote: "It is too early to say whether *Life Studies* is great art. Enough, for the moment, to realize that it is inescapably encompassing art."<sup>19</sup> The confessional poets are neo-romantics, writing in defiance of different versions of the modernist ascendancy: where the Americans were in revolt against the new critical scholasticism of the Cold War era, and the buttoned-down academic verse which it sanctioned,<sup>20</sup> for Baxter there was Curnow's laconic Poundian realism, evolving (around the time of Curnow's shift to the university) into a more explicit formalism and epistemological scepticism. All in their own ways anti-academic, the confessional poets' expressivist candour is a tactical response to what they perceive, in both poetic and social registers, as a normative, repressive, or as Lowell put it "tranquillized" gentility.<sup>21</sup> Baxter's harping on lice and defecation, his sexual admissions, his self-flagellation, while evoking a different ambience than the intimate revelations of his North American counterparts, in structural terms perform the same function.

But this is not the most troubling aspect of confessional inclusiveness. Something the confessional stars have in common is the tendency to generate those public legends which, preceding them in even the most rigorous reader's encounter with their work, interfere with the hygiene of new critical formalism. It's so hard to separate life and work that the latter seems inevitably to "encompass" the former. We have noted this process already with

Baxter, but the limit-case here, as in so many aspects of the confessional project, is Plath. In Plath, as in Baxter, the biographical legend helps bring the work to a certain non-standard readership. For attracting the attention of this partisan fan-base, which appears to include readers who read no other poetry, the confessional poets have received few thanks from their critics. They have tended instead to be minoritized for it (here again the same holds for Plath as for Baxter) as if somehow their work were obscurely diminished by the “indiscriminate feeling” which surrounds them.

To what extent, though, do confessional *strategies* explain these pervasive confessional legends? The Confessionals strive for dramatic immediacy. Accenting content rather than form, and existential rather than epistemological anxieties, confessional poetry’s anti-modernism is apparent in its instrumentalist approach to language: the poem is not a process or a problem but a testament. Looking more closely at particular poets reveals, within these general parameters, a variety of procedures. For Lowell, in *Life Studies*, with its manifest overtones of a psychoanalytic case history, the most obvious consideration is probably the re-emergence of narrative. Plath aims less for narrative than for drama, and it may be that the key to her immediacy is in her structures of address (specifically, her dramatic interpellation of a mute second person). If Plath’s signature is confessional *intensity*, Baxter’s is more like confessional *transparency*. Here too a factor is the domestic immediacy of personal address, along with conversational language and a new preponderance of concrete imagery: “That’s the life I lead, / Simple as a stone, / And all that makes it less than good, Te Kare, / Is that you are not beside me” (“He Waiata mo Te Kare,” 540). The numerous critics who have noted these elements have also been quick to vouch for the sense of candour which they generate; we read that the Jerusalem poems “transparently display the texture of his life,” that “[t]he mask of style has been dropped . . . to reveal the man himself, guileless,” and that “[t]he poems are a document of personal fallibility and inward quarrel [in which] . . . [n]othing is censored out.”<sup>22</sup>

My point here is not that these remarks can be deconstructed (though plainly enough they can), but merely that they confirm that certain features in late Baxter, as in confessional poetry at large, generate a strong sense of biographical *veritas*. That said, however, if I describe these features sketchily it’s because we know already that they are only one

element in this biographical complex. The Baxter myth is not explained fully by the poems. In this sense the fears of his literary colleagues are, at least in their own terms, justified. The media theatre which Baxter stirred up in the last years of his life brought him many more admirers (and detractors) than his verse, and for this expanded audience the text is not the first point of attachment. The same has been said many times about Plath. Her poems, remarkable though they are, in themselves don't account fully for her celebrity. If we want to explain her iconic profile, clearly we need to factor in her historical location at the dawn of second-wave feminism, the manner of her death, the subsequent archival and editorial vicissitudes, and a network of uncanny correspondences between these paratextual controversies and the gothic interiors of the poems themselves.

In another sense, however, the *difference* between Plath's case and Baxter's is at least as revealing. Both, as I have noted, have been damned by association with their admirers. To critical discourse they seem faintly tacky — in Roland Barthes' sense, perhaps: sticky with ideology — and in each case the poetic text is in danger of sinking beneath the biographical noise. But whereas, at least by any commonsense reckoning, the outcome in Plath's case appears to be accidental — only the most hard-hearted cynic would suggest that Plath contrived it: that she actually *wanted* to be supplanted by a cartoon of herself — what stands out in Baxter is the level of premeditation and conscious orchestration. The bearded mendicant who stalks the media represents a studied act of public self-fashioning, a refinement of Baxter's creative vocation in which poetry itself has been demoted to an accessory dimension. If he never entirely makes good on his promise to go to Jerusalem and stop writing poems, the gesture itself is not merely rhetorical. Curnow complains that the poet's celebrity serves as a "crutch" to support the poems. But for Baxter it's actually the other way round: poetry itself is reduced to a support role, subsumed in a broader engagement. Baxter translates his confessional semantics into a mixed-register activism: poetry, yes, but also media theatrics, prose propaganda and lived intervention. And the danger that in this campaign of self-exposure he might find himself supplanted by a caricature is one which he seems willing to embrace in the service of a more urgent social imperative.

## Confessional postcolonialism

Today, of course, confessionalism is highly unfashionable. But in fact romanticism more generally has long received a bad press here. In part it's an effect of the sort of risk-averse Kiwi masculinism that Kai Jensen has written about in *Whole Men*: in such a coercively laconic environment, expressivism is not well tolerated. The emergence of a local modernism underlines the point, particularly given Curnow's ambivalent (and untransparent) relationship with the romantic underpinnings of cultural nationalism. Kendrick Smithyman, in *A Way of Saying* (still the only book-length work on New Zealand poetics), is perceptive about the nationalists' disavowed romanticism, but speaks himself from a quite avowedly anti-romantic position — narrating a teleological progress from provincialism to regionalism, and from romanticism to a poetry which he might have described as “modernist” but prefers to call “academic.” Baxter, not surprisingly, gets peremptory (rather Curnowesque) treatment in Smithyman's account. Since then, the laid-back late modernism of the *Freed* era, the rarefied post-structuralist version, and the postmodern language of historical relativism, following in sequence have shut the door ever more firmly on Baxter's mode of bardic heroism.

So when Stead writes approvingly that the later Baxter “is coming down off his high romantic stilts,”<sup>23</sup> he is speaking to this prevailing anti-romantic sentiment; if Baxter's poetry is getting better, then it stands to reason that he must be growing out of his romanticism. In certain formal respects this scaling down is plausible. However, Baxter's romanticism runs far deeper than his register choices, his prosody, or his elevated habits of address — and deeper even than the “horrible catalogue” of romantic stock-in-trade that Smithyman assembles: subjectivism, irrationalism, over-valuation of inspiration and enthusiasm, fetishisation of “the intrinsically poetic quality of certain classes of objects,” and so on.<sup>24</sup> Certainly much of this caricature readily adheres to Baxter. But it overlooks the level of historical consciousness which will see his writing evolve into a genuine political activism.

Where Baxter, then, is at his most decisively romantic is in the structure of his social analysis. I have in mind an argument proposed by John McGowan about the way in which romanticism leverages off the oversights of modernity:

The first romantics attempted to reconstruct a social totality. Blake abhors reason whereas Hegel enshrines it, yet both are striving to overcome what they see as modernity's resistance to unity. These early romantics introduce the theme of "the excluded" . . . , those elements of human life that appear to romantic intellectuals as insufficiently acknowledged in the societies that they inhabit. Lear in the storm discovers the things he has taken too little care of. The romantic artist, everywhere and continually, makes this discovery; he denounces society's indifference to and ignorance of the very values, ideas, desires, and aspirations that the artist deems important. . . . Whether by expanding the terms reason and reality, as Hegel does, or by insisting on the reality and significance of the irrational, as Blake does, or by indicating by-products of the cash nexus that classic liberal economic theory does not acknowledge, romantic artists and intellectuals try to bring back onto the stage of awareness entities that modernity neglects.<sup>25</sup>

In Baxter the outcome of this is a characteristic dualism. Much though he chafes against this dualistic habit in the anti-sex rhetoric of mainstream (and particularly what he likes to call "Jansenist") Catholicism, his own work revolves around a repertoire of heavily loaded binarisms: childhood/ adulthood, Catholic/Calvinist, pub/university, creativity/domesticity, and so on. Of course, simply *inverting* the binary exclusions of bourgeois thought can get entirely too predictable, a complaint which has been levelled at romantic thought often enough. In short Baxter's dualism sometimes gets tedious. But it also underwrites his political convictions. It is this ingrained manner of ordering the world which enables Baxter to recognise, to identify with, and to act upon, the situation of Māori as the prime excluded force in New Zealand society: excluded, that is, in terms of social disadvantage, but also in terms of the neglect of Māori culture as a site of alternative values. A number of variously determining factors — personal, historical, accidental — led him over time to an increasing knowledge of the Māori world.<sup>26</sup> But I would argue that it is the profoundly romantic structure of Baxter's thought which allowed him to process this knowledge with such conviction, putting him ten years ahead of Pākehā liberal culture at large, literary culture included.<sup>27</sup>

The self-revelations of modern confessional poetry have always aspired to be more than merely personal. Lowell's "target," according to Rosenthal, is not just himself but "himself as the damned speaking-sensibility of his world."<sup>28</sup> With or without Lowell's resonant family history, the American Confessionals, in their testimony of trauma, sought to bear witness to the disowned *collective* trauma of post-War American consciousness. Baxter's originality — and I can't think of anyone else who has done this — is to stage that romantic, confessional wager in the context of the disavowed trauma of colonial settlement. "Sestina of the Makutu" is from the last year of Baxter's life:

In the dream I am lost in a Maori graveyard  
Among the dunes of sand,  
And like a wave of black water  
The Makutu hits me. No terror like this,  
Latrines, ovens, graves, a woman's anger  
Splitting my skull with a stone axe,

Yet it is Te Whiro who wields the axe  
Or else te taipo, the masters of the boneyard  
Where I have to walk. Why should the Maori anger  
Rise from the roots of the grass and the sand  
To choke the soul of this  
Old pakeha? To drown in deep water

Is the fate of those who go into the water  
Of the marae. I know why the axe  
Is raised above my skull. I know why this  
Dream comes out of Te Whiro's yard  
To flatten a house built on sand  
With the storm of an old anger,

And I accept the anger  
As drowning men open their lungs to the water  
Because the battle among the dunes of sand  
Is won by losing it. I know the axe  
Of the Makutu was made in a yard  
Where warriors drank black water before this

For their mother the land. The towns built over this  
Black bog of a people's anger,  
Sweet-shop, jail and railway yard,  
Will fall like leaves into the water  
When willows are chopped by the farmer's axe.  
Blood swallowed by the sand

Rises again out of the sand.  
On an old pakeha's head let this  
Makutu break its axe,  
Since anger breeds anger.  
The one who walked the water  
Has no voice in Te Whiro's yard

Except that the yard's dark sand  
Should drink down like water this  
Old man's blood, and aroha, not anger, blunt the axe. (590-91)

The dream which frames this expiatory fantasy evokes an unconscious which is “collective,” but in a strictly limited (not Jungian) sense; the guilt which is given voice here is not universal, but contingent and historical. The metaphor which offers “this / Old pakeha” as a scapegoat, as if this could atone for that colonial trauma, is of course no more than that: a poetic conceit. The subject can't pretend that his own experience is representative: he may perhaps speak *to* Pākehā culture, but he can't speak *for* it. Nonetheless this owning of colonial history — learning, internalising, taking responsibility for it — anticipates a challenge which his Pākehā audience must eventually take up in real, historical time.

Baxter's attempts to generalise his personal experience don't always proceed smoothly. Much like Plath with her holocaust imagery, his predilection for metaphors of sacrifice leads to effects which can seem uncomfortably disproportionate. More than one critic has demurred, for example, at the terms in which he addresses the Jerusalem hapū, Ngāti Hau:

What can this pakeha fog-eater do?

Nothing; nothing! Tribe of the wind,  
You can have my flesh for kai, my blood to drink.

(“Poem for Colin 34,” 471)

As Bill Manhire puts it, “it is hard to tell if one is dealing with a respectable Christian tradition or an act of deranged self-deification.”<sup>29</sup> And it typifies a problem in many of these late poems, where a generalised rhetoric of self-abnegation, and in particular the

imperative of deferring to and learning from Māori, resonates uneasily when voiced by a subject so resolutely vatic and authoritative.<sup>30</sup> A nervousness about this clumsy heroics, about primitivism, and about cultural appropriation, has made academic critics cautious about Baxter's taha Māori. The poems inherit from the romantic tradition rhetorical contradictions which they frequently fail to resolve. And yet it's hard to deny that the confrontation with colonial history which figures so unequivocally at the centre of the Jerusalem work — a political engagement which proceeds just as surely from the same romantic cast of thought — marks Baxter out as our “postcolonial” contemporary like no other poet of the Sixties or Seventies.

### **Jerusalem as theatre**

It is almost impossible to overstate the density of what Baxter found in Jerusalem: the episode concentrates the main themes of his life and work to an extraordinary degree. It begins with the Catholic-Māori conjunction: by following the Nineteenth Century missionaries up the River he was able to bring together the two principal spiritual and political drivers of his late career. But at the same time — or consequently — it also reiterates, and in certain ways even resolves, a number of other abiding concerns. In answer to his ambivalence about the nuclear family, and his tendency to demonise it in binary romantic terms, the Jerusalem experiment gave him “family” without domesticity. The commune's hippie tribalism, facilitated by Ngāti Hau, and to a certain extent modelled on an understanding of tikanga Māori, gave him back a version of the “tribe” from which he had always felt cut adrift. And in quite a fruitful way, I think, Jerusalem also resolved the tension — clearly articulated as far back as early poems like “The Mountains” or “Haast Pass” — between the competing attractions of solitude and multitude, the lure of romantic isolation and the obligations of social engagement. In the 1951 address “Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry” Baxter described what he saw as the romantic dilemma:

If [the poet] breaks with the society and departs into the Wilderness in customary Romantic style, then he loses brotherhood with all but similar outcasts. What Justice demands is something more difficult — that he should remain as a cell of good living in a corrupt society, and in this situation by writing and example attempt to change it.<sup>31</sup>

Jerusalem proved that the choice need not be so stark; it allowed him a necessary measure of distance (in terms of locality, and in terms of the social norm) but without depriving him of community and audience. Most of all, however, Jerusalem finally allowed him to realise — in a more than rhetorical manner — that lamination of “writing” and “example.”

Of course there is one more key element to the Jerusalem complex, namely the language, and particularly the visual language, of the hippie counter-culture. If Baxter was always an activist-in-waiting, he was also a highly theatrical poet. But it was this new vocabulary which allowed him, for the first time, to realise his penchant for self-display in the form of a genuinely activist theatre.<sup>32</sup> In some ways Baxter probably misunderstood hippie culture — a complaint one can still hear today from writers twenty years his junior. His moralism and pietism derive from a different structure of feeling; he no doubt idealised hippie culture in different terms from those in which it idealised itself; and there may well have been among some younger people a kind of “get off my cloud” resentment about having their *shitik* appropriated. But none of this vitiates the overwhelming synergy. Just as it did with Pākehā indifference to Māori, Baxter’s dualistic cast of thought gave him a model with which to make simplified but potent and immediate sense of the new movement. Hippie culture spoke to him in the language of social exclusion. And as a maverick but highly evolved romantic — as a consequence largely isolated from the emergent power-base of New Zealand literary culture — he found himself in perfect position to catch the wave of the Twentieth Century’s most influential romantic resurgence.

If one single factor has done more than any other to dislodge Baxter’s poetry from the centre of the Baxter effect, it is surely the photographic imagery associated with Jerusalem — by which I mean primarily the many well-known images of Baxter himself (the matted hair and long beard, the bare feet and sawn-off trousers, oilskin, rosary beads and crucifix, and often an audience of young admirers). These images are crucial to Jerusalem’s social impact. Murray Edmond, in an early but perceptive response, discussed the implications of Jerusalem for Baxter’s writing:

As I see it, Jerusalem is central in the sense that it moved into the place that poetry had occupied for Baxter. Jerusalem was an attempt, concrete, realised, continuous, real, not art, to make a poem which would speak to men . . . . Had he lived, it seems to me, Baxter's direction would have been towards ceasing publishing. I do not say towards silence, because he had obviously found another way to speak.<sup>33</sup>

The Jerusalem commune was made possible, or “funded,” by a massive liquidation of Baxter's poetic capital. I don't mean simply that his publications and speaking engagements paid most of the bills, but that without Baxter's mana the commune would not have been established, and nor would it have generated the kind of media theatre which is an essential part of its political meaning. Baxter paid a considerable price, on the one hand in terms of his health and energy, and on the other in terms of the alienation of an important sector of his established audience. But the pay-off was in his managing to reconcile and harness those twin imperatives of writing and example. The commune was a concrete event, with significant material ramifications. At the same time, however, it was also a *performance* — an attempt to model an ideal community — whose most expressive outlet was the image that Baxter himself presented to the media. As in the poetry, the gambit is confessional, requiring his own experience to carry the weight of an ethical ideal. His self-presentation, then, bears the responsibility for mnemonically condensing and representing the Jerusalem ethos, and for broadcasting this to a far wider audience than that which would ever come directly to the poems.

Wedde speaks of his “[u]sing signs that were always big and clear enough to generously risk parody”<sup>34</sup> — true enough of his poetry, but never more true than of this public self-fashioning. Today, when I show those late images to my students I inevitably get the same reaction: initially, laughter, not unsympathetic, but containing as I hear it a certain element of derision (the fashion crimes of the Summer of Love at a first approach appear to forestall more searching interpretations). But my students also recognise readily enough that they are not really laughing at Sixties style proper, but at a hybrid exaggeration in which hippie *couture* has been crossed back into a Christian-derived image-stock of prophesy and asceticism. Pressed a little further they have no trouble in semantically unloading its implications: identification with youth and the marginalised, Franciscan embrace of poverty, public nose-thumbing at the normalcies of bourgeois materialism, and a generous

element of messianic hubris. It's not hard to decode this sumptuary language, and Baxter's audience has always done so — his literary detractors, and the right-wing press, no less surely than his counter-culture adherents.

As Wedde implies, this billboard-scale language has its dangers: of alienating his previous audience; of sidelining the nuances of the written work itself; of simply inviting the derision of his “readers” if they fail to see any further than the shopworn hippie stereotypes. Thus, however complex his motives may have been — and doubtless the mix contains at least as much poorly digested narcissism as it does well-calculated clowning — his Jerusalem experiment required extraordinary nerve: physical, social, and artistic. The political gearing of his poetic mission was plainly underwritten by a demanding family lineage, and (however anodyne the psychology) it seems likely that there was something in the Jerusalem experiment of Baxter's need to try to live up to his father's activist heroism. In any case, whatever the personal factors that made it possible, and whatever equivocations one has to put aside to say so, there is plainly something generous (to use Wedde's phrase) in this conversion of the poet's image into the currency of public dispute. In “A Ballad for the Men of Holy Cross” (1966) Baxter alludes to one of his theatrical antecedents:

When Benedict Joseph Labre  
Lay in the streets of Rome,  
Some thought he was a holy man,  
Some thought he was a bum . . . . (337)

Baxter's performance of “visible poverty”<sup>35</sup> stages the same deconstructive provocation. His self-identification with “the excluded” is a challenge to the binary categories which organise bourgeois culture. Most vivid of all, in the end, is his commitment to Māori. In the rhetoric of the poems there may be problems which remain unsolved, but it's hard to deny the semiotic potency of his tangi, or to ignore what it tells us about his status among his adoptive Māori community. Like the famous image of Norman Kirk holding the hand of a Māori child at Waitangi, the images of Māori and Pākehā grief splashed across the pages of the metropolitan dailies signal the arrival of something new in our cultural politics. We can argue, of course, about how far we have come since. But as a comment

on Baxter and his cultural effect, the Pākehā mourners who made that early “marae visit,” re-tracing Baxter’s own bicultural journey, bear material witness to the force of his example for change.

### **Taking poetry seriously**

It’s not hard to see why Baxter and Curnow quarreled in the Fifties and Sixties, or why Curnow should remain so absorbed in that quarrel that he still couldn’t let it go in 1973. Their careers display a striking inverse symmetry. Curnow, whose father was an Anglican minister, admirer of the Victorian poets and adept of complicated parlour verse forms,<sup>36</sup> abandoned his own training for the Anglican priesthood in favour of the secular mission of his literary nationalism. While settler nationalist map-making is inevitably a romantic project, Curnow’s version already wore that veneer of Poundian austerity which helped prepare the way for his transition from the late Forties towards a more epistemologically disenchanted and orthodox modernism. At the same time, his poetic output slowed to a trickle and then appeared to dry up entirely, a correlation which, if Baxter paused to consider it, would only have confirmed his negative view of the university and the academic vocation which Curnow had assumed from 1951. It’s not recorded that Baxter and Curnow ever met on the Auckland campus, but recalling the bitterness of the campus tour in “Ode to Auckland” it is bracing to imagine how such an encounter might have played.

What Baxter absorbed at his father’s knee was Burns, along with the English Romantics,<sup>37</sup> and a residual Presbyterianism. The two careers cross in the Forties, when youthful Baxter poems like “Prelude NZ” and “The Mountains” seemed sufficiently marked by the influence of his own cohort to persuade Curnow, in the 1945 Caxton anthology, to endorse him as his heir. But Baxter’s embrace of the South Island myth was only ever superficial. His “huge ice torrent / Moving over bluffs and bowls of rock . . . / . . . yearning over our roofs / Black pinnacles and fangs of toppling ice” — much though it resonates with the desertified landscape of the hostile settler-nationalist sublime — has been thoroughly reoccupied by “some other / Kind of love”: that is to say, by a Christian metaphysics (368). “At the Fox Glacier Hotel” dates from 1966, but the process was more-or-less complete as

far back as “Poem in the Matukituki Valley,” from 1949, the year after Baxter’s confirmation as an Anglican. So while Curnow’s life and thought become progressively more secular, Baxter heads off in the opposite direction, traversing Curnow’s abandoned faith before ultimately finding his way to Catholicism in the mid-Fifties. However, this is just one way to indicate the gulf which opens between them. In *Jerusalem Daybook* (1971) Baxter writes:

Who is harsher than this god of ours? . . . . I would not advise any man to follow him. He comes like a sandstorm out of the desert, or the avalanche on a mountain village, or tons of black water from the depths of the sea.<sup>38</sup>

While this helps to annotate “At the Fox Glacier Hotel” (God as “the avalanche on a mountain village”), God is also “tons of black water from the depths of the sea.” So when the mākutu hits “like a wave of black water” in the sestina of the following year (1972), it is Māori-as-the-other-of-colonial-history which now comes to occupy the transcendental topos. Capitalise this Other in the Lacanian sense, and we can say that settler poetry has finally come full circle, from the disavowal of conquest in the South Island myth to Baxter’s self-abasement before the postcolonial Sublime.

Thus Baxter’s example sounds the death-knell of Curnow’s Pākehā-centric nationalist myth. But even this may not entirely explain the acute sense of personal betrayal that we hear from Curnow, from Glover, and from other members of the literary fraternity, because the Baxter of Jerusalem also overtly challenges their newly institutionalised model of poetic pseudo-professionalism. Legend has it that in the Top House at Jerusalem, when toilet paper was in short supply, it wasn’t unheard of for commune members to make do instead with a handful of Baxter manuscript. The former commune member who told me this story recalls the poet’s response: “The last possession I’ve got is my mind and they’re using it for toilet paper. Fucking good, brother, fucking good!”<sup>39</sup> Whether this is parable, or “factual” truth, it’s consistent with the version in *Jerusalem Daybook*:

There is also the matter of mental poverty. The man called James K. Baxter, who is like a dead body in the ground, swells up and gives off a stink of words. I suppose he does it for money and kudos.

It is absurd to say I am really a poor man while I keep on putting words together. Words set in order are mental possessions. Well, best for me to write my words, and then forget what I have written.<sup>40</sup>

Baxter didn't turn his back on poetry at Jerusalem, though in this and other statements he gestures at relinquishing it. What he clearly did, however, was to subordinate his writing to the needs of his community, and to that greater social vision of which the commune was the most concrete expression. Writing is just one dimension of a more ambitious militancy.

Notice once again, then, how far we have come from Curnow, reflecting in the Penguin introduction of 1960 on that prodigiously ill-assorted couple, Cresswell and Mason:

About the same time — that is, in the few years following the first World War — both seem to have discovered in verse an object worthy of a life's devotion. That might not have been so remarkable in this country, if they had not insisted that, as poets and because they were poets, they remained responsible adult New Zealanders: more responsible, because set aside for a special task. That was new; it was "taking poetry seriously," and it marked the end of the undisputed reign of whimsy in New Zealand verse. The early work of both was of a new kind among New Zealanders because, in whatever else it fell short, it was not sentimental and committed the whole man to the poetry.<sup>41</sup>

Literary "maturity" appears on the horizon with the idea of poetry as a wholly-committed vocation — a model which has evolved, by the time he writes this passage, into the modernist professionalism of the poet-academic now accommodating Curnow himself, as it will most of the country's more respected poets of the next two generations. But not, of course, Baxter. For as Curnow will complain in the poem I quoted at the outset, Baxter no longer wears one hat, but *three*: the "whole man" has ceased to be invested in this singular mission. It is not that Baxter isn't still a driven, ambitious writer; his poetic labours at Jerusalem are as prodigious as at any other stage of his career. But poetry for Baxter is no longer a self-vindicating occupation ("a special task") — in fact for Baxter it never has been, but this becomes much clearer in this final phase of his life as he learns to combine it more effectively with his task as a social critic. His populist, untidy poetic activism is not, therefore, the end of taking poetry seriously, but clearly it is an unnerving challenge to the formalist, contemplative role of the poet-professor.

This essay prefaces a more ambitious project: I am trying to clear a space in which to put together a “reading” — which is to say, a cultural history — of the Jerusalem commune. In other words, I want to address Baxter’s “work” by attempting to trace the impact of a material intervention, reconstructing (principally by means of oral testimony) not just the commune’s history, but its downstream influence on the lives of the people involved. The Jerusalem commune is a fascinating episode in Aotearoa’s history of grass-roots biculturalism, and in some sense perhaps a foundational moment in the contemporary struggle to renegotiate colonialism and its legacy. As I have argued throughout, it is also fundamental to the poet’s own legacy. Not that it’s simply Baxter’s own story: the “Baxter effect” which it implies is collective; there is no story without Baxter’s followers, without the Sisters of Compassion, and above all without the remarkable relationship between the commune and Ngāti Hau. While Baxter himself is indispensable, it may be that the episode’s most stimulating theme is this collective agency. What light a thick description of the commune might shed on the writing remains to be seen. But it should be self-evident that such an inquiry involves addressing Baxter the poet in a serious register.

To Murray Edmond, in 1973, the Jerusalem challenge was entirely salutary: “He presents to poets a provocation, a direction; so much in fact that now and in the future it will be necessary for all New Zealand poets to work out for themselves where they stand in relation to Baxter.”<sup>42</sup> Three decades on it would be difficult to claim that our poetry has made very much of this challenge. It is partly, of course, that the extraordinary convergence of courage, serendipity, charisma and timeliness — the formula which gives us late Baxter — is simply not reproducible. However it’s also that the main currents of local poetic culture, in the period since Baxter’s death, have flowed in exactly the opposite direction — away from his masculinism, his subjectivist heroics, his content-driven, testamentary logic, and his engagement in brute politics. Weighed against Baxter’s own romantic criteria, much of what results becomes a game played for questionable stakes. The shift I’m describing is broadly historical, and won’t be corrected just by grumbling about it. But returning to Baxter reminds us that poetry can be, and has been, otherwise. Usefully, then, we might ask where we stand *as readers* in relation to Baxter’s singular example. If we still mean to take poetry seriously, that is, we need to articulate more fully the challenge to poets, and critics, which his accomplishment still poses.

*John Newton: Teaches in the School of Culture, Literature and Society, University of Canterbury. Completing a book on Baxter's Jerusalem commune.*

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C.K. Stead, "Towards Jerusalem: The Later Poetry of James K. Baxter," *Islands* 3 (1973), pp. 7-18. Among other examples, see Peter Simpson, "A Poet's Life; a Life's Poems," *Span* 12 (1981), pp. 25-29; Bill Manhire, "Events and Editorials: Baxter's 'Collected Poems,'" *Islands* 31-32 (1981), pp. 102-20.

<sup>2</sup> Stead, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter* (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Curnow, *Collected Poems 1933-1973* (Wellington: Reed, 1974), p. 250.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Glover, "Up The River At James Baxter's Funeral," in *James K. Baxter, 1926-72: A Memorial Volume* (Wellington: Alister Taylor, 1972), p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> "I won't share in the beatification of Baxter. When young he caused me more perplexity and trouble than anyone I've known. . . . When he creek-jumped to Roman Catholicism his innate devious Jesuitry remained confirmed, unaltered. He was more of a nuisance than before. Espousing the dead-beat kids was no more than coming down to the only level of society that he could fit in." *A Memorial Volume*, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Alistair Campbell, "Hemi at Jerusalem," *A Memorial Volume*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful, however, for two early responses which *don't* make this assumption, and which have encouraged me in the direction I am pursuing here: Murray Edmond, "The Idea of the Poet," *Cave* 4 (1973), pp. 29-39; William Broughton, "A Discursive Essay About Jerusalem," *WLWE* 14 (1975), pp. 69-90.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Wedde, Introduction, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, ed. Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (Auckland: Penguin, 1985), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Wedde, Introduction, p. 44. The ensuing Oxford anthology, which backs away from Wedde and McQueen's biculturalism, ranks Baxter second to Curnow. Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien and Mark Williams, eds., *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English* (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> "By settling for post-Baxter we gained a sense of explored but uncharted freehold." Harvey McQueen, Introduction (1), Miriama Evans, Harvey McQueen and Ian Wedde, eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* (Auckland: Penguin, 1989), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Jensen's argument is shown to best advantage in Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1996), pp. 127-48. Among the "notable exceptions" are three texts which have assisted my thinking about aspects of this essay: Alan Riach, "James K. Baxter and the Dialect of the Tribe," in Mark Williams and Michele Leggott, eds., *Opening the Book: New*

---

*Essays on New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1995), pp. 105-22; John Dennison, "Load-Bearing Structures: Pākehā Identity and the Cross-Cultural Poetry of James K. Baxter and Glenn Colquhoun," MA Thesis, U of Otago, 2003; and an unpublished article by Alex Calder, "'Nature Enter Me!': the Question of Pākehā Turangawaewae."

<sup>13</sup> To highlight just one silence among many, is it not at least curious, in light of Baxter's eminence and of his eminently problematic masculinism, that we have still yet to see the first full-dress feminist or gender-political treatment of his work?

<sup>14</sup> Wedde, pp. 25, 43-44. Again, the earliest and most influential formulation of this argument is probably Stead's in "Towards Jerusalem."

<sup>15</sup> James K. Baxter, *Collected Poems*, ed. John Weir (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), p. 505. Subsequent references appear in brackets in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Walker, I think, has this label in mind in "Baxter's Notebook," *Landfall* 97 (1971), pp. 20-24; Vincent O'Sullivan touches on it in *James K. Baxter* (Wellington: Oxford UP, 1976), p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> On several occasions in the mid-Sixties Baxter refers to Lowell's influence; these include James K. Baxter, *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1967), pp. 80, 126; and his author's note in Charles Doyle, ed., *Recent Poetry in New Zealand* (Auckland: Collins, 1965), pp. 29-30. Kendrick Smithyman notes in 1965: "At the time of writing Baxter's most recent innovations in his writing are obviously the result of close study of Robert Lowell, and particularly of Lowell's *Life Studies*." *A Way of Saying* (Auckland: Collins, 1965), p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> Lowell himself, whose family were Episcopalians, had converted to Catholicism in 1940. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 926.

<sup>19</sup> M.L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *The Nation* 189.8 (1959), p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> The confessional response, of course, was one among many as American post-War poetry looked for ways to escape the enclosure of high modernism: see the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountain poets, the New York poets, and so on.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," *Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Simpson, p. 28; Edmond, p. 36; Manhire, p.115.

<sup>23</sup> Stead, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Smithyman, pp. 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1991), pp. 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> See Paul Millar, "'The Rent Due for a Skull': James K. Baxter and the Legacy of Parihaka," in Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O'Brien and Lara Strongman, eds., *Parihaka: the Art of Passive Resistance* (Wellington: City Gallery; Wellington: Victoria UP; Parihaka: Parihaka Pa Trustees, 2001), pp. 187-91.

<sup>27</sup> Of course there were exceptions, whom Baxter was aware of and to some extent inspired by; writers Roderick Finlayson, Barry Mitcalfe, Noel Hilliard, and painter Michael Illingworth spring immediately to mind.

<sup>28</sup> Rosenthal, p. 155.

---

<sup>29</sup> Manhire, p. 115. Others who have interrogated this passage in similar terms include: Broughton, pp. 86-87; O'Sullivan, p. 56; and Danielle Brown "James K. Baxter: The Identification of the 'Poet' and the Authority of the 'Prophet,'" *JNZL* 13 (1995), p. 136.

<sup>30</sup> Danielle Brown discusses this issue persuasively, pp. 133-42.

<sup>31</sup> *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. Frank McKay (Auckland: Heinemann, 1978), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Broughton, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Edmond, pp. 36-37.

<sup>34</sup> Wedde, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> See James K. Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook* (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1971), p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> See "Conversation with Allen Curnow" [interview with Mac Jackson], Allen Curnow, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, ed. Peter Simpson (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1987), pp. 245-46.

<sup>37</sup> Baxter discusses this in various places, including "Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet," *The Man on the Horse*, p. 122, where he also mentions Henry Lawson.

<sup>38</sup> Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook*, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Jack Doherty, interview with the author, 28/8/03.

<sup>40</sup> Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook*, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Curnow, *Look Back Harder*, pp. 51-52. While Curnow notes the unlikelihood of this pairing, he appears to miss the fundamental irony: that while the Mighty Pen of Cresswell remains committed to its Muse, the real poet Mason gives up poetry for politics.

<sup>42</sup> Edmond, p. 37.

Filename: ka\_mate01\_newton.doc  
Directory: J:\nzepec\_content\ka mate\1\final  
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\b.flaherty\Application  
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot  
Title: Introduction: "a refusal to read"  
Subject:  
Author: John Newton  
Keywords:  
Comments:  
Creation Date: 24/12/2005 16:47:00  
Change Number: 9  
Last Saved On: 02/02/2006 10:31:00  
Last Saved By: Library  
Total Editing Time: 69 Minutes  
Last Printed On: 02/02/2006 10:32:00  
As of Last Complete Printing  
Number of Pages: 23  
Number of Words: 7,795 (approx.)  
Number of Characters: 39,838 (approx.)