

hone. gone

Brian Potiki

...come simply to call
on a tired old mate...
laid out in a box
no fancy halo, no thump left in the old
ticker

so hone wrote for baxter (hemi) after his early death 36 years ago. and like hone, baxter – the most profoundly bi-cultural of our pakeha poets – had the privilege of a tangi at jerusalem on the wanganui river, a catholic community like kaikohe where hone was buried, next to his mother, at kotahitanga marae – the name itself full of significance for this most word-loving and political of poets.

i heard of his death on national radio – first hone reading a few lines, then a *summa* from his biographer janet hunt, then a eulogy from our prime minister. a fitting tribute. next morning an early call from liz marsden, a friend from the north: *hone harawira wants us to sing “no ordinary sun” at his tangi – with actions!* and so we did; in the presence of selwyn muru, tame iti, ngahuaia te awekotuku, dun mihaka, pat hohepa and others. the small, ancient wharenuui was packed. next to the open coffin were hone’s whanau and those from otago such as suzanne ellison who had accompanied hone on his long journey towards te reinga.

after the mihi hone harawira joked of how i’d stolen from hone’s poem to make a waiata of it. i replied that our group from mangataipa got to sing it to hone tuwhare at the nga puna waihanga hui at te kaha in 1983 – and afterwards he came up to me and rasped his approval: *sweet! real sweet! sweet!*

very deaf in his last years, he was irascible; his last publisher roger steele was almost driven to wash his hands of him. and a young friend visiting him a few years ago at his last home, kaka point (below dunedin) told his mother: *mum, he's just a bloody drunk!* his first books of poetry – *no ordinary sun* (1964), *sapwood and milk* (1970), *something nothing* (1974) – contain poems that, like mccahon's otago landscapes, will forever be etched into the consciousness of our nation. and i think in his later years, while showing us all that sex – particularly the war cries of orgasm – should be celebrated and, indeed, shouted from the mountain tops, he was writing for the crowd.

after we sang *no ordinary sun* (with actions) in front of the coffin (framed by an arch of green leaves and photos of whanau), selwyn muru rose and – changing only the gender – quoted from memory hone's poem *tangi*:

*...death was not hiding in the cold rags
of a broken dirge:
nor could i find her
in the cruel laughter of children,
the curdled whimper of a dog.*

but i heard her with the wind
crooning in the hung wires
and caught her beauty by the coffin
muted to a softer pain –
in the calm vigil of hands
in the green-leaved anguish
of the bowed heads
of old women.