A Portrait of the Artist:
the Life and Career of James K. Baxter

Sebastian Brooke

> "...he does stand at the threshold of poetry in this country...so much in fact that now and in its future it will be necessary for all New Zealand poets to work out for themselves where they stand in relation to Baxter."
>
> *Murray Edmond*

This brief, biographical essay is intended to introduce one of New Zealand's most prominent writers to a Japanese audience, and as a result, perhaps stimulate some new readers towards exploring the work of James Keir Baxter further, and consequently, the history and depth of New Zealand literature.

James K. Baxter knew from an early age that he wanted to write, to be a writer, and to be considered a writer. Any other type of work that was to be taken on throughout his life would be considered secondary to his main occupation, to his literary career. Baxter's ambition, one that was shared seriously by only a handful of other writers in New Zealand at the time, was that writing would provide an income, would be his vocation, his career.

> "To many older writers he is the marvelous boy they welcomed on to the scene who gracelessly turned his back on them, first to play out the melodrama of the doomed, boozing,

> fornicating Calvinist, and latterly the farce of the Catholic hippie." (Stead p9)

James Keir Baxter was born in Dunedin, deep in the South Island of New Zealand, on the 29th of June, 1926, and died in Auckland on the 23rd of October, 1972. His middle name was a tribute to the Scottish socialist, Keir Hardie, signifying his parents' liberal political beliefs. His father Archibald was a farmer, a descendent of Scottish settlers and a conscientious objector during World War I. His mother Millicent, who took degrees from Sydney and Cambridge, was a daughter of Professor John Macmillan Brown, an eminent scholar and a major force in the shaping of university life and education in New Zealand.

A great number of Baxter's poems are autobiographical, and his family, especially his parents, frequently appear in them. He mythologized his mother into a figure of menace and canonized his father into an equally symbolic though far more benevolent figure. His father became a figure of inspiration and aspiration for the young James:

> *When I was only semen in a gland*
> *Or less than that, my father hung*
> *From a torture post at Mud Farm*
> *Because he would not kill* (*Pig Island Letters,* p281)

James K. Baxter would come back again and again to his father's stand against military conscription, connecting it to his own internal struggles:

> *Father, is it easier to fight*
> *The military machine, or the maggots of one's own heart*
> (*Collected Poems*, p547)

Baxter was to remember his childhood country as Eden, and its inhabitants, both the living and the dead, as those who had known the Fall. From the age of sixteen he was writing accomplished poems, such as *The Mountains, O Wind Blowing, The Unicorn, The Eagle* and *The Killing of a Rabbit.* Every period and important event of Baxter's life, from about the age of seven, can be found in his poetry and prose. He once described each of his poems as 'part of a large subconscious corpus of personal myth, like an island above the sea, but joined underwater to other islands' and that 'what happens is either meaningless to me, or else it is mythology.' As such, a knowledge of Baxter's life and experiences can help us in understanding and appreciating his writing:

> It is characteristic of James K. Baxter, however, that his personal life and presence is essential to his poems: he constantly draws himself, as well as the particular people and places around him and the things that happened to him, into his poems and indeed most of his writing.
>
> (Parr, p10)

In 1944 he enrolled at the University of Otago, his 'long, unsuccessful love affair with the Higher Learning', but wasn't to complete his Bachelor of Arts for more than ten years. He became somewhat of a celebrity at the university, with his poems published in *Critic*, the student magazine. He won the Macmillan Brown prize for poetry, initiated by his grandfather, for his poem *Convoys*. That same year Millicent took James and his poems to Caxton Press in Christchurch, and this collection became *Beyond the Palisade*. In a matter of months the teenage poet had become a well–known writer, with his photo in a bookstore window display. His first book, *Beyond the Palisade*, was published when he was eighteen and almost all

the poems were elegies of one kind or another. Allen Curnow, the editor of the first edition of *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, included six of Baxter's poems from the book, quite an achievement for such a young poet.

Baxter left university to work in factories and on farms from 1945–1947. His struggle with alcoholism was also in full swing at this time and in 1947 he moved to Christchurch, officially to renew his university studies, but privately to seek Jungian counseling, the symbolism of which began to appear in his writing. In Christchurch he took various jobs and attended lectures on and off, all the while fertilizing his poetry with 'the irrigating river of alcohol'. In 1948 his next volume, *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* cemented his reputation as New Zealand's pre–eminent younger poet. Baxter joined the student paper *Canta* in Christchurch as literary editor, also publishing his own poetry in the paper. 1948 was a year of distress and disturbance for Baxter, but also one of change and achievement. His social life was rigorous, with plenty of drinking, talking, pub–crawling and party–going. Psychiatry had proved useful, he was engaged, and he had been baptized at St Michael's, an Anglo–Catholic church. During the 1950s Baxter tried to come to terms with the complex world of social institutions – marriage and family, work, church and state:

> All the pressures...on me at this time to accept the Calvinist ethos which underlies our determinedly secular culture like the bones of a dinosaur buried in a suburban garden plot – *work is good; sex is evil; do what you're told and you'll be all right; don't dig too deep into yourself.*
>
> (*The Man on the Horse,* p125)

He was a young married man with two children to feed so he entered Teachers College in 1951 and worked as a postman while

studying at university part–time. But for the young family man of the 1950s, morality and creativity were opposed to each other. Baxter was experiencing the difficulty of being a 'good man' and a 'good poet':

> It is the business of a poet, I think, to be destitute as well as honest. He may have money; but he should recognise that it is dirt. He may have prestige; but let him hate it and wear it like an old filthy coat. Then he may be able to stay awake a little better. Love will not harm him, though. It will slice him open like a fish, and hang him by the heels, and let the sun into his private bag of dreams and idiot ambitions. He will think he is dying when he is just beginning to wake up.
>
> (*The Man on the Horse*, p126)

He believed that alcohol unlocked the sources of poetry, but that the same catalyst was destroying him. It was a painful dilemma for Baxter, to risk losing the poetry by giving up the alcohol, but he took the chance, even though the decision would continue to haunt his poetry:

> *Look at the simple caption of success,*
> *The poet as family man,*
> *Head between thumbs at mass, nailing a trolley,*
> *Letting the tomcat in:*
> *Then turn the hourglass over, find the other*
> *Convict self, incorrigible, scarred*
> *With what the bottle and the sex games taught,*
> *The black triangle, the whips of sin.*
> *The first gets all his meat from the skull–faced twin*
> *Sharpening a dagger out of a spoon,*

Struggling to speak through the gags of a poem:
When both can make a third my work is done.
(*Pig Island Letters 9*)

The Fallen House, his next volume, was published in 1953, yet throughout his career he was writing articles and critical works on poetry at the same time. His output as a writer was phenomenal, attested to by his unpublished notebooks held in the University of Otago's Hocken Library collection. Charles Brasch, the founding editor of New Zealand's first and foremost literary quarterly *Landfall*, commented on Baxter's poetic flow:

> I am disturbed by what I take to be due in part to Mr Baxter's copiousness: that he writes poetry rather than poems... I have the impression that instead of each arising strongly from its own special occasion, taking its individual form and language, a number of them have been chopped off arbitrarily from a continuous poetic conveyer–belt.
>
> (Brasch, *Phrases & Poems*, p22)

Baxter was unusual amongst New Zealand writers of the time as he had moved away from the quintessential postcolonial New Zealand preoccupation with landscape and isolation and had started to focus his poetry and prose on social problems, urban life and degeneration. His own experiences as an alcoholic had led him to counter the perceived notion of New Zealand as a paradise for all and also brought him eventually to Alcoholics Anonymous early in 1955. His fondness for those on the edge of society, for those seemingly left behind, for the ideal of the masculine, was to remain a strong theme throughout both his writing and his life:

Tomcat

This tomcat cuts across
zones of the respectable
through fences, walls, following
other routes, his own. I see
the sad whiskered skull–mouth fall
wide, complainingly, asking

to be picked up and fed, when
I thump up the steps through bush
at 4am. He has no
dignity, thank God! Has grown
older, scruffier, the ash–
black coat sporting one or two

flowers like round stars, badges
of bouts and fights. The snake head
is seamed on top with rough scars:
old Samurai! He lodges
in cellars, and the tight furred
scrotum drives him into wars

As if mad, yet tumbling on
the rug looks female, Turkish–
Trousered. His bagpipe shriek at
Sluggish dawn dragged me out in
Pyjamas to comb the bush
(he being under the vet

for septic bites). The old fool
stood, body hard as a board,

heart thudding, hair on end, at
the house corner, terrible,
yelling at something. They said
'Get him doctored.' I think not.

(*Collected Poems,* p307)

In 1956 he became an editor in the School Publications Branch of the Department of Education, enabling him to continue to earn his living with his pen. He also started to receive catholic instruction as part of his decision to convert to Catholicism, a subject he later titled 'Fire Insurance' when discussing this part of his life in a lecture to students. His conversion was perhaps the final straw for his wife Jacqueline, and they separated in 1957, with Baxter being received into the church in 1958, the same year his next volume of poetry, *In Fires of No Return,* was published by Oxford University Press. It was his radio play broadcast the same year, *Jack Winter's Dream,* that was to give him some kind of international attention and to truly secure his place at the forefront of New Zealand writers. This radio play went on to be adapted for both the stage and film.

1958 was also a year of travel for Baxter, having received a UNESCO Fellowship to study educational publishing in Japan and India. He left for Japan in September 1958 and his family joined him in reconciliation later in India. *Howrah Bridge and other poems* was published in 1961, after his return from India, a volume that bears Baxter's sense of displacement and disorientation in a land of intense poverty and what he saw as the misery associated with it. The poor and the oppressed and social issues were to become the subject matter of Baxter's work, the paragons of his verse, and he would start to employ the ballad form more often in his writing, such as in *Lament for Barney Flanagan*, a ballad eulogy upon the death of a barman:

While publicans drink their profits still,
While lawyers flock to be in at the kill,
While Aussie barmen milk the till
We will remember Flanagan.

(*Collected Poems*, p136)

Baxter was also writing plays and articles continuously, exploring many of the same themes of alienation and disillusionment with New Zealand society. His *Ballad of Calvary Street* stirred up many varied reactions with its depiction of modern, puritanical home life in New Zealand, in opposition to the rose–tinted perceptions held by many of life in the egalitarian paradise of New Zealand in the 1950s:

Ballad of Calvary Street
On Calvary Street are trellises
Where bright as blood the roses bloom,
And gnomes like pagan fetishes
Hang their hats on an empty tomb
Where two old souls go slowly mad,
National Mum and Labour Dad.

Each Saturday, when full of smiles
The children come to pay their due,
Mum takes down the family files
And cover to cover she thumbs them through,
Poor Len before he went away
And Mabel on her wedding day.

The meal–brown scones display her knack,
Her polished oven spits with rage,

While in Grunt Grotto at the back
Dad sits and reads the Sporting Page,
Then ambles out in boots of lead
To weed around the parsnip bed.

A giant parsnip sparks his eye,
Majestic as the Tree of Life;
He washes it and rubs it dry
And takes it in to his old wife –
'Look, Laura, would that be a fit?
The bastard has a flange on it!'

When both were young, she would have laughed,
A goddess in her tartan skirt,
But wisdom, age and mothercraft
Have rubbed it home that men like dirt:
Five children and a fallen womb,
A golden crown beyond the tomb.

Nearer the bone, sin is sin,
And women bear the cross of woe,
And that affair with Mrs. Flynn
(It happened thirty years ago)
Though never mentioned, means that he
Will get no sugar in his tea.

The afternoon goes by, goes by,
The angels harp above a cloud;
A son–in–law with spotted tie
And daughter Alice fat and loud
Discuss the virtues of insurance

And stuff their tripes with trained endurance.

Flood–waters hurl upon the dyke
And Dad himself can go to town,
For little Charlie on his trike
Has ploughed another iris down.
His parents rise to chain the beast,
Brush off the last crumbs of their lovefeast.

And so these two old fools are left,
A rosy pair in evening light,
To question Heaven's dubious gift,
To hag and grumble, growl and fight:
The love they kill won't let them rest,
Two birds that peck in one fouled nest.

Why hammer nails? Why give no change?
Habit, habit clogs them dumb.
The Sacred Heart above the range
Will bleed and burn till Kingdom Come,
But Yin and Yang won't ever meet
In Calvary Street, in Calvary Street.

(*Collected Poems*, p213)

Pig Island Letters was his major work of the 1960s, published in 1966. These poems are dedicated to the problem of survival, with a self–portrait of the Baxter of the early 1960s at the centre. In 1965 he applied for the Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago in Dunedin, the only award of its kind in New Zealand at that time, giving the holder a salary, an office, and a year of full–time writing:

> 'I owe to Dunedin my identity,' he said in 1957. 'This is the place where I fired the first shot in the long and difficult conflict with suburban values: a conflict chiefly productive, so far, of wounds and poems.' This was still true nearly ten years later, when he told another Dunedin audience that the Burns Fellowship, which he then held, should not have been given to 'a family man, teetotal, moderately pious, not offensive to sight or smell,' but to his 'schizophrenic twin,' Horse, the youth who had suffered in Dunedin twenty years earlier.
>
> (Oliver, *A Portrait*, p52)

He applied for and was given a second year on the fellowship, following which a fellowship was created for him by the Catholic Church. He was giving lectures, seminars, poetry readings and workshops, and all the time he was writing a torrent of poems:

> *At 4am I still sit*
> *Awake at the kitchen table*
> *Like a Martian in a space suit*
> *Drinking coffee and writing. In forty years*
> *I haven't found a cure*
> *For being human.*
>
> (*Collected Poems*, p400)

Baxter wrote in 1967 and 1968 nearly forty essays for the *Tablet*, a catholic broadsheet. He was most at ease with the same themes and social problems that had always preoccupied him – alcoholism, unemployment, trade unionism, the plight of the poor, and the needs of the young. As a young man he wrote:

> One of the functions of artists in a community is to provide a

> healthy and permanent element of rebellion; not to become a species of civil servant.
>
> (O'Sullivan, p5)

> The poet or prose writer who turns his eyes from the fact of human suffering is involved in self–betrayal.
>
> (Baxter, *Recent Trends*, p15–16)

1969 was the year which saw the final transition for Baxter from Family Man into Prophet. Externally, Baxter changed almost overnight from the clean–shaven, relatively trim figure in tweed jacket and tie who once preached in Canterbury Cathedral, to the guru with bare feet and unkempt, straggling beard, who headed north to consort with junkies in Grafton Gully, Auckland, and eventually with the dispossessed young in his community at the small Maori mission station called Jerusalem, on the Wanganui River. Actions had started to resonate more strongly with Baxter than his words were able to, and he feared that he was becoming the sort of civil servant of poetry that he had once decried, domesticated and castrated into inaction. While he was following a not unfamiliar path in his communal quest for God through renunciation, poverty, and adoption of the fatherless, he was breaking new ground as a European New Zealander choosing to live in a Maori village and finding in Maori values and practice the best available antidote to the aridity and intolerance of the compact New Zealand majority:

> This last Baxter is not out of keeping with the earlier ones. He was still both supremely egoistic, and utterly open to others; still prosy and droning, and lyrical and compelling; still ostentatiously pious and irrepressibly randy; still honey–tongued and foul–mouthed: still angel and urchin. The

> epilogue is spoken by an old man. But it is the same play.
>
> (Oliver, *Portrait*, p125)

In an isolation broken only by the company of Maori villagers and nuns, and by occasional visitors, James K. Baxter became 'Hemi', the Maori transliteration of his first name, and here he wrote the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, published in 1970, followed quickly by *Jerusalem Daybook* in 1971 and *Autumn Testament* in 1972. In his last months he was preparing *Runes* for the press, which was published posthumously in London in 1973. He had been suffering from malnutrition and had experienced a couple of mild heart attacks. The next attack came in Auckland, on the 22nd of October, 1972, and it was to be his last. His body was escorted by his family back to Jerusalem where he was given the rare honour for a European New Zealander of a full Maori funeral and burial on tribal land.

Baxter's greatest achievement was his continual output over his whole lifetime, the details of his shifting mind through his lifetime of writing, through his many stages and transformations, and the fact that he allows, even impels us, to share in his life through his poetry:

> The volume's (*Collected Poems*) 620 pages, written over a span of 30 years, gives in detail and in breadth what a man thought and felt as he tried to shape his life in an unusually deliberate way. It begins with a melancholy and precocious boy, obsessed with his own loneliness – '*what land shall receive me except as a stranger*' – with sex, with his family, and with the drive to put all that mattered to him into images and verse.
>
> (O'Sullivan, *Review*)

The final words in this brief introduction to the career of one of New

Zealand's most prolific writers shall go to James K. Baxter himself, to 'Hemi':

High Country Weather
Alone we are born,
And die alone.
Yet see the red–gold cirrus,
Over snow–mountain shine.

Upon the upland,
Ride easy stranger.
Surrender to the sky,
Your heart of anger.

(*Collected Poems*, p34)

References

Baxter, James K. *Pig Island Letters.* Oxford University Press, London 1966.
Baxter, James K. *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry.* Caxton Press, Christchurch, 1951.
Baxter, James K. *The Man on the Horse.* University of Otago Press, 1967.
Brasch, C. *Phrases and Poems.* Caxton Press, Christchurch, 1966.
Oliver, W.H. *James K. Baxter: A Portrait.* Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1983.
O'Sullivan, V. *New Zealand Writers and Their Work: James K. Baxter.* Oxford University Press, 1976.
O'Sullivan, V. "The Collected Poems of James K. Baxter" (Review) *Listener* 96(2128): 84–5; 25 Oct 1980.
Parr, C. *Introducing James K. Baxter.* Longman Paul, 1983.
Stead, C.K. 'Towards Jerusalem: the later poetry of James K. Baxter.' *Islands* 2: 7–18; Autumn 1973. Reprinted in *Kin of Place.* Auckland University Press, 2002.
Weir, J. (Ed.) *The Collected Poems of James K. Baxter.* Oxford University Press, 2004.