James K. Baxter: In Quest of the Just City

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> It is possible without obvious absurdity for our politicians to call our country a Happy Island, in some degree a just one. But poets are different from politicians . . . . I believe that our island is in fact an unjust, unhappy one, where human activity is becoming progressively more meaningless.[1]

THE last years of Baxter's foreshortened life were spent in active communitarian efforts to overcome the human injustices and false "realities" of New Zealand society as he experienced it. From his activities at the Jerusalem commune and among the derelicts of the cities, some of his finest writing was also produced. The present essay, which addresses itself to a consideration of Baxter's view of man in society, will however focus chiefly on his work and experience before that final, triumphant, period.

From very early in his career Baxter believed that the link between artist and society is close, and necessary. He suggested that, "The analogy between the processes of art and the ritual of tribal magic is an exact one. Both enable catharsis by discovering shape in history, thus relieving the isolation of the individual" (*Trends*, p. 5). He saw the artist as "a cell of good living in a corrupt society" (*Trends,* p. 18) and could never have agreed with that New Critical shibboleth which holds that an artist's life bears no relevance to the evaluation of his work. Rather, and the final shape of his own life seems to bear it out, he held the Keatsian view that "a man's life of any worth is a continual allegory" and once said of himself, "What happens is either meaningless to me, or else it is mythology,"[2] adding that he mythologized his own

life. Throughout his career, and centrally for most of it, he believed that the poet's life and work are inextricably bound together and that poetry, indeed all art, has the function of speaking to man's condition and alleviating that condition.

Much of his work suggests that his human world is experienced as chaos, for which his repeated image is "the lion's den" — thus, in *Pig Island Letters*[3] a poem is "A plank laid over the lion's den." Man's struggle is to reduce chaos to life-giving order, though Baxter does not finally make clear whether, as he sees it, the individual imposes order or simply discovers an order already inherent in nature. Whatever the case, he began by seeing poetry both as the means of individuation and the expression of the journey towards individuation.

A poet of varied moods, modes and approaches, Baxter by and large is subjective, expressionist; but he is not merely confessional, even though at one stage in his career he admired, and learnt from, Robert Lowell. A seminal experience was his early reading of Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* which confirmed his sense that day-to-day experience has much more than its surface significance, hence his lifelong habit of parable-making and his declaration that consciousness itself can only assimilate "the crises, violations and reconciliations of the spiritual life in mythical form" (*Man on the Horse*, p. 23). Beyond this, he had some sense of himself as part of the flux, process. In *The Fire and the Anvil* (1955), he observed that, "nearly all poetry is dramatic in character. The catharsis which a reader experiences could not occur if he felt the self that the poem expresses to be entirely actual; rather, the self is a projection of complex associations in the poet's mind, and the poem enables the reader to make the same projection."[4] Given the generally Jungian tendency of his mind, I believe that Baxter here is not adverting to the problem of aesthetic distance, but acknowledging his sense of collectivity. He

is not "confessional" if only because he sees himself as typical or paradigm, as well as individual. In some part, too, his mythologizing is exploratory, an attempt to locate and clarify his own archetypes.

II

Another part is his effort to locate himself in the world. When still very young, he concluded that in searching for the true self, the discovery of a home in nature, identification with a place and a past, are vitally necessary. For the *pakeha*[5] New Zealander, peculiar problems arose from the historical fact that *pakeha* society was a transplant from Britain, grafted with incomplete success onto an already existing native society in the islands of Ao-Tea-Roa. Although the graft was virtually to consume the original plant, the attempt to transport the soil from which it had originally grown was doomed to failure. The artist in such a strangely nurtured "society," which lacked "even the shadow of a folk culture" (*Trends*, p. 8) was forced into the isolation of unreality.

Still a long way from that all-embracing sensitivity to the Maoris which characterised his last years, Baxter in his mid-twenties was already very conscious of the Maori "presence" in New Zealand, but saw it only as antithetical to the pioneers' intrusion. The Maoris "had their gods to shield them — we have none."[6] For the original settlers, "the first forgotten," fate is the "life that knows not life," and "unPolynesian, our deaths are near. / From the hills no dream but death / frowns." Yet, curiously, the earliest *pakeha* were to an extent forced to re-enact the nomadic stage of establishing a culture, and many artists have attested to the importance in New Zealand consciousness of "the comfortless semi-nomadic existence of the swagger and rabbiter and worker on gold dredges" (*Trends*, p. 5), not to mention the whaling-men and early missionaries. What intervenes between these early pioneers and present-day New Zealand society is

the almost craven emulation of British custom and British education, which continues to exist in "the schizophrenia of the New Zealander who cannot distinguish himself from his grandfather" (*Trends,* p. 9) and to be part of the consciousness of every New Zealander. Without any show of flag-waving nationalism, Baxter fought this cultural dependence constantly, his method at first being to locate the bad spots in his society and fulminate against them, and later to minister to those who had become victims of the society.

Much of his first book, *Beyond the Palisade,* published when he was eighteen, concerns the natural New Zealand environment, the *pakeha* ancestors failing to make a home there, the land remaining a "cold threshold land" still overshadowed by "the weight of an earlier and prehistoric isolation." Brooding nature is felt as indifferent, or hostile, ground of man's suffering and defeat. This passive oppressive sense of it continues in *Blow, Wind of Fruitfulness* (1948),[7] but the landscape is more peopled and there are more localized, specifically human experiences. By 1951 Baxter felt clearly that animism is essential to the artist's view of the world, his greatest contribution being the linking of "submerged animism with our immediate affairs." A few years later, in *The Fire and the Anvil,* he declared it the poet's task to lay bare "the animistic pattern which underlies civilized activity" (p. 61).

Animism he took to be characteristic of the child and the primitive, and believed that poetry's vital force derived from rediscovering and revaluing childhood experience, which was at one with nature in "the paradise of childhood," Eden, the lost garden. In contrast, New Zealand's natural environment was experienced by the *pakeha* intruder as remote, impersonal, indifferent, an obstacle to his material possession of the land. As Charles Brasch once put it, "To New Zealanders, however, nature remains above all the enemy to be subjected by force,"[8]

concluding that, "It is less nature than we ourselves, suffering from a form of *hubris* almost world-wide today, who have to be subdued and given a proper sense of our place in the scheme of things." This was Baxter's view also. He, more than any other New Zealand artist, in both his work and his life, laboured to achieve that "proper sense."

What brings about the change from the child's animism to adult *hubris* and anti-naturism? As Baxter sees it, there are two very different kinds of adult in modern society. These are *natural man* and *bourgeois man*, and each is incomplete. I do not know whether Baxter ever read Hesse, but the distinction he makes is similar to the Steppenwolf/Harry Haller division, although Baxter's "natural man" is a roisterer from the start. Most adults are bourgeois, conscious of a lost freedom, but not nearly conscious enough. Some passages of *The Fire and the Anvil* concern a third category, the intermediate stage between child and man, the adolescent, who "recognizes then for the first and often the last time that he is an individual, a free agent" (p. 52). His "huge discovery" is that freedom is our present condition. Most find the discovery too burdensome and choose instead conformity, but for the few who do not the intermediate stage between child and man becomes a seed-time of creativity. Most turn away from "His flawed mirror," the natural world:

> hiding our souls' dullness
> From that too blinding glass: turn to the gentle
> dark of our human daydream, child and wife,
> Patience of stone and soil, the lawful city
> Where man may live and no wild trespass
> Of what's eternal shake his grave of time.[9]

Baxter is not totally unsympathetic to this retreat, but it would be a self-betrayal for the artist, or creative man, the one who has embraced his "huge discovery." His role is to provide a health-giving element of rebellion.

Natural man and bourgeois man is each a "half-man," and "the poet as family man" experiences a double portion of Original Sin, conscious of himself participating in

each half, involved in a hopeless struggle to integrate the two halves, though he is instinctively nearer to natural man whom, in the fictitious guise of Timothy Harold Glass, Baxter describes as "the fallen Adam, who remembers, as if in a dream, his first state" (*Man on the Horse,* p. 20).

For the young Baxter a valued experience in this struggle, an embryonic hint of community, is that of friendship, in his own case with Denis Glover, Louis Johnson, Colin McCahon (painter of profound New Zealand "landscapes"), Bob Lowry, the Auckland printer — "Opening his heart like a great door / To poets, lovers, and the houseless poor" — or Fitz, the barman at the National Hotel, Wellington, subject of Baxter's great ballad, "Lament for Barney Flanagan":

> Flanagan got up on a Saturday morning,
> Pulled on his pants while the coffee was warming;
> He didn't remember the doctor's warning,
> 'Your heart's too big, Mr. Flanagan.'
>
> Barney Flanagan, sprung like a frog
> From a wet root in an Irish bog —
> May his soul escape from the tooth of the dog!
> God have mercy on Flanagan.
>
> Barney Flanagan R.I.P.
> Rode to his grave on Hennessey's
> Like a bottle-cork boat in the Irish Sea.
> The bell-boy rings for Flanagan.
>
> Barney Flanagan, ripe for a coffin,
> Eighteen stone and brandy-rotten,
> Patted the housemaid's velvet bottom —
> 'Oh, is it you, Mr. Flanagan?'
>
> The sky was bright as a new milk token.
> Bill the Bookie and Shellshock Hogan
> Waited outside for the pub to open —
> 'Good day, Mr. Flanagan.'
>
> At noon he was drinking in the lounge bar corner
> With a sergeant of police and a racehorse owner
> When the Angel of Death looked over his shoulder —
> 'Could you spare a moment, Flanagan?'
>
> Oh the deck was cut; the bets were laid;
> But the very last card that Barney played
> Was the Deadman's Trump, the bullet of Spades —
> 'Would you like more air, Mr. Flanagan?'

The priest came running but the priest came late
For Barney was banging at the Pearly Gate.
St. Peter said, 'Quiet! You'll have to wait
For a hundred masses, Flanagan.'

The regular boys and the loud accountants
Left their nips and their seven-ounces
As chickens fly when the buzzard pounces —
'Have you heard about old Flanagan?'

Cold in the parlour Flanagan lay
Like a bride at the end of her marriage day.
The Waterside Workers' Band will play
A brass goodbye to Flanagan.

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.

For Barney had a send-off and no mistake.
He died like a man for his country's sake;
And the Governor-General came to his wake.
Drink again to Flanagan!

Despise not, O Lord, the work of Thine own hands
And let light perpetual shine upon him.

III

The hope of the body was coherent love
As if the water sighing on the shores
Would penetrate the hardening muscle, loosen
Whatever had condemned itself in us:
Not the brown flagon, not the lips
Anonymously pressed in the dim light,
But a belief in bodily truth rising
From fountains of Bohemia and the night,

The truth behind the lie behind the truth
That Fairburn told us, gaunt
As the great moa, throwing the twisted blunt
Darts in a pub this side of Puhoi — 'No
Words make up for what we had in youth.'
For what we did not have: that hunger caught
Each of us, and left us burnt,
Split open, grit-dry, sifting the ash of thought.
(*Pig Island Letters*, p. 10)

Memory of Eden gives the natural man his consciousness of himself as manbeast, and his drive to rebel against the society which otherwise encourages all that is basest in humanity, particularly inertia and indifference. Acedia is the dread affliction to be fought. Baxter states the dichtomy in many poems, such as "At Aramoana":

I turn also
to my dream, in nooks below
the sandhill cone, where Gea
speaks in parables of rock,

wordless, unconnected with
the acedia of a tribe
never *once* happy, never
at peace . . . (*Man on the Horse*, p. 24)

Bill Pearson, in a valedictory note just after Baxter's death, recalls a period of friendship in the late 1940s, when the two saw a great deal of each other: "We remembered *Darkness at Noon*, and read Graham Greene, talking in terms no longer in vogue of natural man and original sin and of eros and agape and caritas and the sin of sloth or despair to which he felt especially prone and called by its mediaeval name *accidie*."[10] Since they name the central concerns of his life the terms never became unfashionable for Baxter. In his "Prose Poems" of 1952 we find him petitioning, "Acedia, my mother, when shall I be born? / A thousand times I have lain down in your black swamp, desireless;"[11] many years later he will declare, "it is worth remembering that the devil of acedia is the most subtle as well as the most brutle of the masters of Hell" (*Man on the Horse*, pp. 15-16).

Closely related to "custom," acedia is both cause and symptom of the individual's lack of a tribe. Always deeply conscious of the sufferings of the poor and all kinds of social derelicts, Baxter was yet highly sceptical of socialism and the welfare state as tribal matrixes. In answer to the question, "How does this acedia affect the fabric of our society and how does it perpetuate itself?" he would have replied that since New Zealand society (a variation of Western society) is materialistic, secular and hostile, the individual is without a tribe and consequently lacks life-sustaining *aroha* (love), but that the socialist state could not be the ultimate answer.

To Yevtushenko, Baxter wrote:

Reading you
I remember our own strangled Revolution:

> 1935. The body of our Adam was dismembered
> By statisticians.[12]

He grew up and came to maturity during a period when the New Zealand Labour Party first had clear Governmental power (1935-1949). To many, that period still seems the finest in New Zealand's brief history. Baxter's father, who has his own respected place in New Zealand consciousness as the country's best-known and most courageous pacifist, was a socialist sympathizer. Baxter himself, influenced deeply by his father, was yet sceptical of the socialists. They, as much as the National Party, in power for most of Baxter's adult life, seemed responsible for the fact that New Zealand society was in his eyes "an unjust, unhappy one where human activity is becoming progressively more meaningless" (*Trends*, p. 16).

This failure to implement the pioneering dream of establishing a Just City Baxter attributed chiefly to the "spirit of secularism" which he felt led to sterility and joylessness. In an unpublished passage of a lecture on "Poetry and Education" he defines the secular spirit as one which:

> has its own pseudo-sacred canons, derived in the main from the social sciences; which, though deeply hominist, is impatient of individual intuition, fantasy or eccentricity; which adheres vaguely to a notion of inevitable moral progress among mankind; which relies for its evidence on numerical calculations; which regards art as decoration or adornment for the museums and cemeteries of public culture; which regards the State, or agencies of the State, as an ultimate authority superior to tribes, families, religious organisations, or the individual conscience. Belief in it excludes belief in anything beyond it.[13]

Such a matrix led inevitably to sterility and joylessness and in such circumstances the poet's commitment is to speak out against centralization, depersonalization and mass conformity. Social criticism began to occupy a central place in Baxter's poetry in the mid-1950s; from that time on he employed the poem as a weapon in dealing with a variety of social problems.

Among his earliest socio-critical poems are those based on the *persona* of Harry Fat, a group in which he makes fine use of enviable skills as a balladist. One, "A Rope for Harry Fat," is the most effective poem I have seen pleading for the abolition of capital punishment. Another, "The Private Conference of Harry Fat," epitomizes the "virtues" of the secular welfare state — material possessions, anti-intellectualism, hidebound insularity, mindless patriotism and pseudo-democracy:

> Said Harry Fat, "I've read about
> A doll who liked to sing,
> And when you tapped his wooden head
> His little bell would ring.
> I like the kind of country where
> The little man is king."
>
> "I quite agree," said Holyoake,
> "It is a splendid thing."
>
> Said Harry Fat, "I've heard it said
> The Civil Service needs
> Protection from the Communists
> Who sow rebellious seeds.
> The right man in the right place
> Will pluck them out like weeds."
>
> "We must keep watch," said Holyoake,
> "On any man who reads."[14]

Sympathizing as he did with socialist attitudes to welfare economics, Baxter nonetheless felt strongly that state organization and administration of man's affairs led to dehumanization. Before him he had the example of individual protest by his father and brother, each of whom had been a conscientious objector (one in each of the World Wars). Archibald Baxter, the father, had been physically tortured:

> But he is old now in his apple garden
> And we have seen our strong Antaeus die
> In the glass castle of the bureaucracies
> Robbing our bread of salt. Shall Marx and Christ
> Share beds this side of Jordan? I set now
> Unwillingly these words down:
>
> *Political action in its source is pure,*
> *Human, direct, but in its civil function*
> *Becomes the jail it laboured to destroy.*
> (*Pig Island Letters*, p. 10)

Life in the land of "Rev. Fraser" and "Seddon and Savage, the socialist father" is a "civil calm" which "breeds inward poverty / That chafes for change." The crude impoverished texture of daily existence in the welfare state, is wittily, scorchingly captured in "The Ballad of Calvary Street,"

> Where two old souls go slowly mad,
> National Mum and Labour Dad.[15]

having raised their typical family into the same environment, of bored habit and neurotic possibility which has nurtured them.

State secularism had removed even the need for surface religious observance, but it had failed to remove a restrictive puritan outlook which always seemed to Baxter the main enemy of community. Aspiring writers wishing for social success, he advised, had best ignore, "the doctrine of Original Sin, offensive to a society whose wealth and culture is founded on clean refrigeration."[16] In "Elegy at the Year's End" (and many other poems) secular puritanism is perceived as the force behind "what men hold in common, / The cross of custom, the marriage bed of knives":

> Spirit and flesh are sundered
> In the kingdom of no love. Our stunted passions bend
> To serve again familiar social devils.
>
> Brief is the visiting angel. In corridors of hunger
> Our lives entwined suffer the common ill:
> Living and dying, breathing and begetting.
> Meanwhile on maimed gravestones under the towering fennel
> Moves the bright lizard, sunloved, basking in
> The moment of animal joy.[17]

Baxter's portrayals of "the kingdom of no love," many and penetrating as they are, range from the direct social consciousness of the early "Mill Girl" to such middle pieces as "A Takapuna Businessman Considers his Son's Death in Korea," from the bawdy, cloacal wit of "Ballad of Calvary Street" (where "yin and yang will never meet") to the all-consuming desire for community in late works such as *Jerusalem Daybook*. At eighteen he had

experienced "A sense of being at / The absolute unmoving hub," the cold hub of nothingness, in a country of emptiness, where (as he put it later in *The Fire and the Anvil*):

> Our pioneer fathers while laying waste the bushland wiped out also the spiritual flora and fauna of Polynesian animism, and replaced it, not, as we might think, with the highest humanist values and the seasonal ritual of the Church, but with Douglas Social Credit and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In our arts and institutions we have cultivated a narrow ground—political loyalty; business acumen; an admiration (via the Tourist Bureau) of large scenery; the community of the hotel bar and playing field; the Puritan virtues, with their accompanying vices . . . but outside the cultivated area remain unexplored the creative powers of man. (pp. 30-31)

IV

Among institutions, the education system was most frequent butt of Baxter's sardonic wit. His work abounds in portraits of frustrated schoolmistresses, mad or malevolent headmasters, and the desolate prison-like atmosphere of schoolrooms or country schoolhouses. In a late poem, addressed to a child, he wrote:

> These poor words are my track to Heaven
> Because they are a gift of sorts
> And may blow in among your thoughts
> Like a fresh wind, where you lie bound
> In that grim dungeon underground,
> The spidery crypt our time has made
> To prove no shovel is a spade, —
> I mean, that graveyard of the nation,
> The oubliette of Education,
> Where God's voice calling finds no daughter
> And charity grows thin as water.[18]

Autobiographical passages of *The Man on the Horse* reveal that from the first Baxter resisted formal education, intuitively realising that it is destructive of individual vital force, and that it interferes with "the discovery of a sacred pattern in natural events" (p. 132), replacing it with "the lens of abstract thought." This process reaches its culmination in universities with their chimerical exponents of "lean / Philosophies of When and If."

Baxter repeatedly excoriated the education system because it did not answer to the deepest needs of the individual, on the contrary tending to denature him. In addition, the system works to perpetuate New Zealand's subservient status, even to the extent of having the children sit in classrooms where "murals represented the English seasons, with lambs and green fields in April" (*Trends*, p. 6). In this ambience young New Zealanders are indoctrinated in "the Calvinist ethos," taught to subscribe to the work ethic, to distrust sex as evil and all kinds of pleasure as debilitating, and to be career-minded and goal-oriented. A typical parable in "Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet," relates an encounter between an Education Department official and an old country Maori. Looking for the right road, coming to a fork, the official asks the old man the right direction.

"I don't know, boss," said the Maori, "Over the hill somewhere." Becoming exasperated, the official says:

"Look . . . if I don't get to Auckland today I'll miss the beginning of a very important conference . . . This country needs education, and they need me to make the right plans for it . . . What's wrong with you, anyway? You're more lost than I am."

"No, I'm not lost, boss. You see, I'm not going anywhere." (*Man on the Horse*, pp. 128-29).

Presumably the old Maori's "core of primitive experience" had never been threatened by the education system, a system from which people need to be rescued (Baxter admired A. S. Neill because he felt that Neill's approach was to allow children scope to de-educate, and thus free themselves). "What kind of education would I have preferred?" he asks. "Perhaps — till ten years old, on a farm in the South Island mountains or the Urewera country, learning to handle a horse or a dog or a gun; then, for a year or two, during puberty, in a Maori *pa*;[19] then perhaps on the coastal boats . . . But our firms and departments require literate peons for their dreary em-

pires of economic liberalism. So we have universal and compulsory education" (*Man on the Horse*, p. 137).

V

Part of the inward poverty of New Zealand life is an uneasy awareness of "overseas." For perhaps the first hundred years of his country's existence as an independent state, the New Zealander thought of Britain as "Home." Since the generation of the 1930s writers have tried to alter this and have succeeded, but partly at the expense of feeding a neurotic insularity. When Allen Curnow resented and fulminated against "overseas experts" he had in mind Britain and, in particular, the tendency of British visitors to New Zealand to offer lofty advice; but throughout the 1950s and 1960s the fabric of New Zealand's daily life (not exempt from the fate of the rest of the Western world, in spite of its isolation) became progressively more Americanized. In particular, the intervention of the U.S.A. in Asian affairs doubly impinged on New Zealand where consciousness grows that Asia is not, after all, "the Far East," but is the Near North.

Baxter, who spent a period at school in Britain just before the Second World War and visited India at the end of the 1950s, saw himself positively as a New Zealander, committed fully to life in "Pig Island," but he always refused to be merely nationalistic or to pretend that the fate of New Zealand was somehow different from that of other small, relatively uninfluential Western countries.

The substratum of anti-American feeling which has existed in New Zealand throughout the post-1945 period, was given impetus by New Zealand's direct involvement in the Vietnam War. Particularly from early 1965 on, various writers such as Barry Mitcalfe, Hone Tuwhare and Baxter became immediately and directly involved in anti-war protest at a time when most of the population seemed to be in favour of troops being sent to Vietnam

and when street protest was a very uncomfortable business. Baxter issued a number of anti-war ballads, such as "A Bucket of Blood for a Dollar," "a death song for mr mouldybroke" and "The Green Beret." While these poems are not among his best work they were the most effective *writer's* contribution to the campaign against New Zealand involvement and they show Baxter as an active "cell of good living" in the period just before his final total commitment to the ideal of community. At the time he said, "The economic liberal Caesar and the communist Caesar, for complex public reasons, are tearing the world apart; in order to die differently, I listen instead to the voice that speaks to me out of the ground. I will never take up arms for any Caesar" (*Man on the Horse*, p. 30). Throughout his career he many times characterized the poet's vocation as listening to the voice of the earth. His voice told him, increasingly, to act.

Baxter's New Zealandness was no simple thing. No isolationist, he rejected the 1930s mystique of Allen Curnow and M. H. Holcroft who had seen the country as an Island in Time. Baxter was committed to New Zealand first because he happened to be born there and to live there. He felt New Zealand's uniqueness, but was also aware that it shared most of its social problems with other Western countries. What, we may ask even so, of the particular sense of "being a New Zealander" manifested in the poetry? In one sense this is answered by the whole work, in another by his particular conception of "Pig Island" — realm of limited expectations, with its covenant of sheep, farm gear and sale day drink, always within the sound of the vast seas, reminder of human littleness in the scale of nature. "Love is not valued much in Pig Island," but rather its domestic simulacrum — captive demanding wife, husband puzzled as to the origin of his vague frustrations, son and daughter growing in their parents' stunted image; yet for Baxter New Zealand was "the only world I love: / This wilderness." As he

saw it, a large part of his vocation was to restore wilderness freedom to the Unjust City of contemporary society.

Throughout the years Baxter's social concern involved many aspects of life in society: drugs, sex, pornography and censorship, the submerged class system, bourgeois conformity. For most of his life there was nothing exceptional in his views on these matters. They were, if one may put it so, conventionally "open" and "liberal." The final years, however, witnessed a notable change, a deepening, which we may sum up with a statement from the concluding essay of his *Six Faces of Love*: "To love means in the long run to die for one's friends. There are no exceptions to that rule."[20] Baxter lived up to this discovery in his work at the Jerusalem Commune which he founded deep in the New Zealand country side, and in the doss-houses in Auckland and Wellington.

So far three collections of writing have come from this last period, *Jerusalem Sonnets* (1970),[21] *Jerusalem Daybook* (1971)[22] and *Autumn Testament* (1972).[23] The chief qualities manifest in these works are Christian destitution (poverty) and love. The work is totally possessed by Christian vision. Back at the beginning of his career, particularly when he was in his twenties, Baxter wrote poem after poem which displayed the rich rhetoric, the incandescence of a writer possessed by the word. His work had a bejewelled density which occasionally got the better of him and became windily splendiferous. *The Fallen Horse* (1953) is perhaps the finest early work, full of memorable images and a palpable sense of the human situation, but *Pig Island Letters* (1966) is a finer book because the rhetoric is under control, in the service of a vision, though a dour one, of a paradisal land ruined by grubbing materialism, stony lack-love and life-choking senseless puritanism.

In the last works, this world's harshness and suffering are acknowledged, accepted, included in a kind of amplitude Baxter had never before achieved. The self-in-

dulgences of the early work are fully put away, and so is the neurotic note of *Pig Island Letters*. We receive instead a man at peace with himself, humble and yet sure. Poverty, hunger, hard-grubbing physical labour, loss of privacy, loss of almost all the "civilized" amenities, but the founding, and finding, of a community based on Christian love, The Word beyond the word — this was Baxter's final experience and ultimate achievement. The poems of that period come together as one masterly, flowing work from a whole spirit, a work from which it is difficult to excerpt, but perhaps the quality may be gauged from the last lines of "Te Whiori O Te Kuri" (The Dog's Tail), which end *Autumn Testament*:

> To go forward like a man in the dark
> Is the meaning of this dark vocation;
>
> So simple, tree, star, the bare cup of the hills,
> The lifelong grave of waiting
>
> As indeed it has to be. To ask for Jacob's ladder
> Would be to mistake oneself and the dark Master,
>
> Yet at times the road comes down to a place
> Where water runs and horses gallop
>
> Behind a hedge. There it is possible to sit,
> Light a cigarette, and rub
>
> Your bruised heels on the cold grass. Always because
> A man's body is a meeting house,
>
> Ribs, arms, for the tribe to gather under,
> And the heart must be their spring of water. (p. 52)

NOTES

Although the bibliographical information in these notes is far from exhaustive, I have made them fairly extensive as a means of providing information about Baxter's work. Since he is one of the finest poets from any Commonwealth country, his work should be much better known. Its absence, for example, from the recent *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* edited by Ellman and O'clair is distressing, especially considering the dullness of much that is included.

[1]James K. Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1951), p. 16. Further page references to *Recent Trends* will be made parenthetically.

[2]James K. Baxter, *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967), p. 122. Further page references to *The Man on the Horse* will be made parenthetically.

[3]James K. Baxter, *Pig Island Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966). Further page references to *Pig Island Letters* will be made parenthetically.

[4]James K. Baxter, *The Fire and the Anvil* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1955), p. 48. Further page references to *The Fire and the Anvil* will be made parenthetically.

[5]***pakeha*** (Maori word), white New Zealander.

[6]James K. Baxter, *Beyond the Palisade* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1944), p. 7.

[7]James K. Baxter, *Blow Winds of Fruitfulness* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1948).

[8]Charles Brasch, "Notes," *Landfall*, 4, No. 3 (September 1950), 186-87.

[9]James K. Baxter, *The Fallen Horse* (Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1953), p. 35.

[10]Bill Pearson, "Two Personal Memories of James K. Baxter: I," *Islands*, 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1973), 3.

[11]James K. Baxter, "Prose Poems," *Salient Literary Issue* (Wellington: Victoria University College, July 1952), p. 5.

[12]James K. Baxter, *The Rock Woman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 81.

[13]Baxter papers, Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand.

[14]*New Zealand Poetry Yearbook: 1956-57*, 6 (Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, 1958), pp. 18-19.

[15]James K. Baxter, *Howrah Bridge and Other Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 53.

[16]*New Zealand Poetry Year Book: 1954*, 4 (Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, 1955), p. 24.

[17]James K. Baxter, *In Fires of No Return* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 39.

[18]James K. Baxter, "Letter to Eugene O'Sullivan," *Poetry New Zealand*, 1 (Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, 1971), p. 26.

[19]*pa* (Maori word), Maori village.

[20]James K. Baxter, *Six Faces of Love* (New Zealand: Futuna Press, 1972), n.p.

[21]James K. Baxter, *Jerusalem Sonnets* (Dunedin: University of Otago Bibliography Room, 1970).

[22]James K. Baxter, *Jerusalem Daybook* (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1971).

[23]James K. Baxter, *Autumn Testament* (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1972). Further page references to *Autumn Testament* will be made parenthetically.