

**‘Reason not the need’ :
John Newton and James K. Baxter’s Double Rainbow**

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O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

(Shakespeare, *Lear*. II.iv.263-64)

After absorbing enough literature and literary theory to perhaps keep him employed until Doom’s crack, John Newton, one of the sharpest Kiwi tools in the arsenal of such dark arts, is leaving the academy and returning to what he once did so well, but abandoned under the weight of whatever university teaching loads onto creatives like him – back to writing his own poetry. Something that happened in the process of writing the ground-breaking book I’m about to consider – *The Double Rainbow: James K Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Community* – triggered a resignation from this previous bright career into the darkness, insecurity and joy of writing full-time. No doubt there was a straw and camel’s back syndrome at work in what has happened to him, but certainly the encounter with the rural Māori descendants of those who lived through Baxter’s Jerusalem sojourn, and the once young communards who carried on after Heemi’s premature death in 1972 has changed his world.

It is almost as if the ethnographer – for that is what he became in the writing of this cultural history – was, like some of the missionaries of an earlier era, converted into somebody else in the process of contact with human lives he had sought to record. You don’t have to sleep with the locals or – to use a loaded phrase, ‘take the blanket’ – to be changed into another self by such a journey. Ask any Pākehā who, like John Newton, has ventured to understand what it might mean to be Māori in any way, shape, or form in today’s world. This was not a search, like Elsdon Best’s, for an imaginary, authentic form of Māori being, but in the spirit of the radical American anthropologist Edmund Carpenter it was a going-to-be-with, a learning to listen and to see.

Carpenter has left a template for what it might mean to produce the kind of thick ethnography Newton seemed so to admire when he taught me in the 1990s. Writing of his mentor Frank Speck, the anthropologist had this to say (Carpenter 80, 83):

Great ethnologists do more than record: they reveal...they entered their subjects emotionally, intellectually, then revealed what they experienced within...Culture, as [Speck] experienced it, was too rich, too full, to preserve in monographs alone. Nothing, he felt, should be lost. He used both a still camera and a movie camera...What was needed, he said, was the power of language, harnessed to humanistic ends ‘by men who, if such exist, possess both the scientific mind and the literary touch’.

It might be argued by Māori that the writing Newton has produced is indeed just another book by a Pākehā intellectual about Māori-Pākehā relationships in a vanished era, with a Pākehā literary figure at the centre: *hei aha mā wai, who cares?*

Nothing could be further from the mark: a comparison with what Newton has done here, and what possibly the last writer steeped in literary theory to visit the Jerusalem community wrote about it all, is instructive. John Needham came from Massey University's English Department sometime in the 1990s, visiting the grave of Baxter with an unnamed literary biographer – all recorded in *The Departure Lounge: Travel and Literature in the Post-Modern World* (16-27). Needham writes persuasively in this essay on the shortcomings of the 'pure textualists' and 'neo-Saussurean' logocentrists, whose arguments seem to him hollow, as he confronts both the reality and the unreality of *word* and *world*. When read under a blazing Jerusalem sun, Baxter's sonnets melt away as mere black marks; but later at his home, in the privacy of an academic's study, the text seems able to drive away the world, and give life to a palpable voice.

Needham is funny and cuts to the quick – he punctures and explains, makes simple and complicates – but in the end, he leaves Jerusalem somehow untouched and untouchable, the several Māori figures he has met mere presences in his experience, described but not named, bit players in his feisty argument with post-modern literary lions. He comes and he goes, leaving much as he arrived. Newton in my view is changed by this encounter, radically transformed in ways that need to be grasped and evaluated. In moving from one life to another, something of the academic is dying away in these pages; other lives are meant to emerge and do so, stepping out from the encrusted myths and sheer silliness, the tired old images of 'life with Baxter'. This was kind of bad a soap opera, one which has long distorted and trivialised much of what really happened, especially between Ngāti Hau and Ngā Mokai in the years that followed Heemi's departure from the scene.

It is this kind of very 'thin' description that I feel John Newton is trying to demolish, pursuing his favoured 'thick' description in the footsteps of Clifford Geertz, and the New Historicist models of the Stephen Greenblatt school. He is looking to escape from the methods and languages that effectively *re-constitute* the cultures he wishes to describe, setting out to act as a kind of participant-observer, allowing the people concerned to speak more freely than in the past. All the while, he remains keenly aware of his role, the interlocutor and censor in every writer who publishes the thoughts of others. In setting out the history of Baxter's turn towards Jerusalem, the relationships he made with tangata whenua, the arrival of Ngā Mokai, Baxter's death, the shift from Ngā Mokai to Ngāti Hau Namarua and the legacy of the communal developments post-Hiruhārama, he is working to move the gaze of the outsider away from the stereotype of the poet-prophet guru and his hippie dropout druggies, to Ngāti Hau themselves, and the reasons that the community and the relationships developed as they did – both while Baxter lived, and after his death in 1972.

The other task he sets himself is to free Ngāti Hau not just from their literary transfiguration in the Baxter narrative of events, but also from their construction as victims of a faceless Pākehā colonialism, or players in Heemi's spiritual journey. Freeze-framed there, they may be read as mere extras in the literary remains of his late-life estate: the Jerusalem writings, deeply influential at that moment in the perceptions of Māori by disaffected young Pākehā (a group in which during the early 1970s, I include myself). Baxter did a revolutionary thing: he brought hidden Māori figures into the forefront of a Pākehā literary discourse, and for this I am forever grateful. Māori

Catholicism, for instance, was unveiled to secular intellectuals as a living force, an historical reality, in poems such as ‘Sonnet 12’ on Mother Mary Aubert. But it’s a very Heemi-fied missionary, the grim corners of her mouth ‘drawn down’, who dialogues with Baxter over the need for work to get us into Heaven, and a Baxter who shoots back, ‘there’s no work for the Maori in the towns’, that the pa she loved was now empty, and the mokopuna of her converts needed ‘drugs to sleep at night’ (460).

The singular quality of Baxter’s poetry at this point is its self-mythologising energy, devouring any of the necessary subjects he falls upon. Mother Aubert serves his purposes; Satan has him ‘again by the balls’; but Father Te Awhitu is there at hand to give him the Host, a spare set of shirt and pants, and to put him in his place with history lessons (460, 466, 470). Yet however much he made the multifarious dark nights of his soul centrepieces in the poetry, he was still bringing one of New Zealand’s major poetic voices to bear on the psychic wound that haunted the nation. This same wound pulsates today, below the surface in our Treaty-settlement environment: the broken promise of Māori-Pākehā relationship, the failed marriage of Waitangi, the truth that dare not speak its name: structural racism.

As Baxter wrote his final works, Māori of course were speaking out for themselves, and a new journey was beginning on a new waka. Baxter however had broken the ground for a transformation to begin amongst Pākehā as well. In meeting a need for himself, and for Ngā Mokai, he inadvertently set in train a series of relationships that Newton sets out to chronicle here, whereby a series of Māori needs were met at Hiruhārama and the river communities in the first five years of the 1970s. Devastated by the poroporoaki nui, the great move to the cities post-War, many Māori rural kāinga had lost a middle generation of rangatahi and pakeke: youth and young adults who had left home and wider whānau in the search for work and the bright lights of the city. It was into just such a specific vacuum that Baxter and Ngā Mokai entered at Jerusalem – and what this important book addresses, it seems to me, is the *mutual need* both communities found in themselves at that historic moment. The question it might also be asking is just how does that need exist today – and how might we be meeting it? More than anything else, I would argue, this is a book about our needs as human beings.

While it certainly seems true, as Newton writes, that Baxter had ‘a tendency to fetishise Māori destitution’ and romanticise their oppression, ‘converting it to his own rhetorical needs’, there was a truth to his coining a biblical metaphor of the community as ‘Sarah’s child’, borne past the age of child-bearing (Genesis 21: 7), with the pā performing the role of collective mothering (94-95). As the Irish writer Declan Kiberd has observed, ‘the English had always had a fatal gift for sentimentalising peoples after they had conquered them’ (46). Thus the writing of the pā and its women particularly, as nurturing Māori mothers to an emotionally barren generation of young Pākehā, can easily give rise to images of black Mammies in the Deep South breastfeeding the privileged children of those who had enslaved them. Pākehā writers have long had a default tendency to exoticise the Māori ‘other’, especially Māori women, and Baxter searching for spiritual nurture at times sounds little different.

Yet whatever the mix of his motives, lofty or low, there was a unique historical moment for Māori into which he and Ngā Mokai entered, one which Newton accurately describes and evaluates in the section ‘Urbanisation and Demographics’ (94-97). The story of Jerusalem, he notes was ‘consistent, then, with the stark pattern of Māori-urbanisation in the post-War decades. In 1945 more than 80 per cent of Māori lived in rural areas. The figure by 1980 was less than 10 per cent’ (95). In spite of Baxter’s belief that there was no work for Māori in the cities, that was where the

workforce of Jerusalem had gone, in one of the greatest per capita internal migrations of an indigenous population seen in the twentieth century. Māori society had been turned on its head in a generation, with all the shocks of adjustment for those leaving and those left behind that such people movements entail.

To even speak of the effects of such seismic disruption in this objectifying language is to somehow civilise and domesticate the pain and ongoing effects of a mass deracination which New Zealand society feels in its innards to the present day. As Walter Benjamin so trenchantly observed, 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (248). In other words, the two go hand in hand and there has never been in human history a purely civilised group standing above the barbarians, but rather human societies with the capacity to act on levels both of intellectual refinement and savage cruelty. This much we should have learned from the Holocaust. Even at this point in their history, within my lifetime, Māori were still struggling to come out from under a pernicious view of their 'level of development', enshrined in the nineteenth century's crude model of anthropological levels: socio-cultural evolutionism. This view of human progress, which situated the primitive savage below the barbarian (both superseded by civilised man, himself a superior evolutionary product of literacy and modernity) had underlain much of the thinking of the colonial masters. Their militaristic paternalism had seen Māori shunted off into rural backwaters such as Jerusalem for over a century, since Te Kooti and Government troops had fired the final shots of the Land Wars in 1872.

What the great poroporoaki had done during the 1950s and 1960s was to bring Māori and Pākehā back together, in a form of enforced intimacy not seen since the mid-1800s when Māori still held the most chips in the game of land use. Of course there had always been some level of inter-relationship, especially in rural areas where Māori shearers, shedhands and fencing contractors formed a vigorous proletariat, as seen in Ihimaera's *Bulibasha*, and there was a continuing level of inter-marriage. In the cities Māori were renting and buying properties, usually in the least desirable areas but they were there, visible and taking part in city life. Young Māori from North Island farms and villages went to trade training schemes in the big cities, including the Little England of Christchurch. There the white burghers would be found staring at strapping young teens from Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Haua walking in wonder about the streets, riding the escalators for fun in Hays and the DIC, their Hendrix Afros signalling there was indeed 'something in the air'.

While Māori were feeling their way into this urban world and their young were both losing their heritage language and gaining a city literacy that would see a revolution of consciousness beginning at around the time Baxter turned his compass north and went upriver, some of their Pākehā peers were also falling out with 'the system'. This group would rebel against the perceived conformities of post-War security needs and materialistic benefits, taking a road that led via drugs, music and counter-cultural philosophies to a rejection of all their parents had striven to achieve in the wake of a long and bloody war: a better world, a more equal society, material comfort and job security. The daughters of the women Baxter perceived as drugging themselves on valium to survive the ennui of afternoon teas in the suburbs and knitting baby clothes were also becoming militant, liberated sexually by the availability of the contraceptive pill. The return of the repressed on these three fronts, in concert, was shaking the tree ever more strongly. The post-War consensus was about to break down, as the postcolonial era took a more obvious turn in New Zealand society on the eve of Britain's abandonment of her distant imperial farm, when she joined the EEC. The cold winds of change blew open a social contract of welfare and full employment that had stitched the Māori-Pākehā wound together in some kind of stasis: not any more.

Brown power, youth revolt and feminism coalesced as some kind of wave for Baxter to surf on in the Jerusalem chapter of his life: the last pages. His contacts with crashpad dwellers in Auckland and Wellington, the frisson of ‘the junkies and the fuzz’, and his new spiritual base upriver from Wanganui gave a location to the script he was to write from February 1969 until his death in October 1972. Those writings are familiar to any Baxter devotee or scholar: *Jerusalem Sonnets*, *Jerusalem Daybook* and *Autumn Testament*. They shone in my firmament and changed my view of things Māori. Biographers like Frank MacKay, anthologists like John Weir and critics such as Paul Millar have all since added to the Baxter story. What John Newton does however is bring into the light the Māori dimension, the communards’ story, and the life of this radical, ramshackle social experiment that had no real precedent in our history, and has never been repeated.

With Baxter often absent – and after his death – the leadership of Ngā Mokai passed to others like Greg Chalmers, who took up the relationship of need and opportunity where commune members worked in exchange for pā food, not cash. Much-needed restorations took place: the painting of the church and convent under Father Te Awhitu’s direction, and the wharekai, Morikaunui. All this flowed on from the whānaungatanga that had gradually grown up among the hippies and the pā women and children (Newton 99). Marae restorations – a phenomenon gathering momentum across Māori kāinga at this time – faced the obvious challenge of labour shortages. Marae in the cities and towns might be short of elders but there were plenty of hands available, and many urban marae spring from this era. In the country it was the reverse: wise elders but no young muscle. The commune members at Jerusalem became a rural Pākehā labour force, available to the tohunga Te Rangimotuhia Kātene, who had been taught at Parihaka and had plans to re-open a whare wānanga, Upokotauaki, at the upper marae Peterehema.

Baxter had earlier offered his workers from the Top House to the old man, and after Heemi died this was taken up: through Pākehā supporters of Ngā Tamatoa in Auckland, truckloads of paint, carpets and tiles arrived to help complete the job, leading to ‘a freshly painted house ready to be reopened’ (Newton 25, 100-01, 116-17). Kātene was able to teach here for several years, passing on Māori tikanga and kawa, ritual and ideology to both local Māori and a group from Ohakune – a new generation, in a restoration that did not exclude the attendance of the hippies, should they wish to be present. The strands were interweaving and the effects of this – especially after Baxter died – included the moving back to Jerusalem of young Māori like Milton Hohaia and his Pākehā wife, Kathy.

From Pungarehu on the Parihaka block, Milton had moved to Auckland as a teenager and later met Baxter at the Boyle Crescent crashpad. He became involved with Ngā Tamatoa in Auckland, and at Baxter’s tangi in 1972 he got the call to return to Jerusalem and work with the hippies in restoring the elements of te ao Māori that remained: ‘Some of us had to come back and help Greg’ (Newton 115). Setting himself up in the former Bag End whare, he fashioned a household that whānau-style, complemented the work of the hippies but remained as a separate kaupapa. He saw himself as a Māori radical returning to rural roots – another example of the diversity and the reach of the unique bicultural experiment Baxter’s Jerusalem turn had set in motion. Newton points out that while the contact with Baxter had originally drawn Milton back to the river, it was the relationship with the tohunga Kātene that helped to cement his belonging there, through teaching him traditional knowledge and forging a link back to Parihaka. This was a name that would become in the decades ahead synonymous with awakening and renewal both in Māori and Pākehā decolonisation, that liberation of the mind so cogently articulated by the Kenyan novelist and theorist of post-colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

The stories of individuals such as Greg Chalmers and Milton Hohaia, Toro Poutini and many others are patiently tracked down, recorded and retold here, reminding us that all social movements are born in the meetings and the stories that belong to individuals. No stereotype of larger processes is adequate to detail such complex events. There are however some generalities in the larger tale that may be pointed out. There were losses and gains for Māori who went to the cities: Milton and other Ngā Tamatoa members lost the rural protection of the hāpu and the iwi, yet gained the street wisdom and the education that equipped them to fight back and change things. There were similar effects for the Pākehā members of Ngā Mokai, who had stepped off the conveyor belt of education and career, and found another way of living and learning at their doorstep. It was something many were never to forget, and made a part of their personal lives and their future place in society. Baxter's Hiruhārama was part of a larger tide but many of its graduates were now uniquely equipped to ride those currents. It is important to restate that while Māori were obviously disadvantaged, ripped off by the effects of settler swamping and military defeat, their disempowerment did not confer an automatic victim mentality. In the same way Pākehā advantage and privilege might have left its children's children ignorant of the real effects of colonisation for Māori, but they were never able to remain innocent of their benefits. Jerusalem was part of that all-round awakening, ongoing in this new millennium.

The summer of 1974-75 as Newton describes it was something of a swansong, a time of fruitfulness, culminating in the restoration of Ngāti Hau's second whareniui, Whiritaunoka, overseen by Toro Poutini. The most powerful man at the pā, and a working link between the two communities, Toro died prematurely in April 1975. In his absence the latent tensions and departures of significant personnel from the Māori and Pākehā wings of this 'exemplary re-imagining of post-colonial relations' began to tell. Milton and Kathy Hohaia left for Parihaka that year and an ill, exhausted Greg Chalmers was not far behind, declaring, 'we had lost the kaupapa' (Newton 125). Other departures, the loosening of the 'no drugs' policy bequeathed by Baxter, the incursion of alcohol and the presence of an unnamed bully ('a Jake-the-Muss character') did some lasting damage. By Christmas of that year, with only the younger members left, 'the Jerusalem Commune appeared to have run its course' (126-28).

The end of the Jerusalem wing was not the end of the story: 'Baxter communities' like Reef Point near Ahipara in the north and Whenuakura on a Lands and Survey block in Taranaki rose up and continued, in the latter case, into the early 1980s (albeit moribund by then). These rural ohu were mirrored by urban Jerusalem satellites such as Vivian Street in Wellington, straight out of the pages of the *Jerusalem Daybook* as re-imagined by a young Victoria University History lecturer, Tim Dyce, who had made the original suggestion that Baxter write this 'theology of communality' (Newton 155). There were many others too – I lived during 1972-73 in an urban commune associated with the Chippenham Community in Merivale, Christchurch, most of whose members were well aware of Baxter and what he stood for, and were trying to live in something at least approaching the life of sharing he espoused. Heemi was ubiquitous among the urban baby boomers of that time, and the spirit abroad he channelled and imperfectly exemplified touched us all. That most of our experiments were likewise seemingly short-lived does little to explain their ongoing power and the persistence of what was good in them.

Bill Pearson, a much earlier, lower profile Pākehā kaitakawaenga (mediator) between Māori and Pākehā, told me when interviewed in 1999 that Māori he knew would say that Pākehā liberals who had left off their chosen involvements in te ao Māori 'had swum back into the Pākehā sea'. Baxter walked between those worlds and now, almost forty years later, John Newton has followed him. He observes in closing that despite the physical benefits of the Māori renaissance Jerusalem faces

many of the same problems of the early 1970s, whereas many of Ngā Mokai after their Māori interlude were able to go back and take up the careers and opportunities for which decades of colonial advantage had prepared them. Some died early, some spun out on drugs, others seemingly disappeared – but that gap existing in 1972 has still not closed and the systemic violence enshrined by colonial structures in a *Once Were Warriors* world of poverty and underachievement remains as yet unhealed.

Nevertheless, as some of Ngā Mokai return upriver to a world bereft of the generation who succoured them, many are going as those who still work to narrow that gap and to keep open the flow of aroha that this unique experiment has kindled. Māori are doing it for themselves but they cannot do it without Pākehā either getting on board or at the very least getting out of their way. John Newton has done the former in the gathering and the writing of *The Double Rainbow* and now that the waka of this book is launched he is doing the latter in letting it go. Hiruhārama, te ao Māori has changed him – and in his own quietly powerful way he has changed Jerusalem, weaving anew its manifold stories, many for the first time here.

Utaina mai ngā waka
Ngā waka o te motu
Toia mai rā ki uta
Ki te takotoranga
A hiki ‘Nuku hiki e
Hiki ‘Rangi runga e
Tēna tēna rā koutou katoa!

(Armstrong, waiata 28)

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