

Baxter's Burns

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There has never been any doubt about the importance of Robert Burns for James K. Baxter: the Scottish poet's ancestral, poetic, political and sexual inspirations and provocations appear everywhere across the range of Baxter's writing and it is a critical commonplace to note affinity and identification. At the same time it is curious to note how this debt is so often acknowledged and then passed over. Family connections are noted, Scottish heritage acknowledged perhaps: but what of *poetics*? What did Baxter *do* with his Burns? There is so much at work in the Baxter oeuvre – so much to pick and so few to do the picking – that to list some of the work still in front of us gives a sense of the enormity of Baxter's range and reach: Baxter and Burns sits as an undeveloped topic alongside Baxter and Lawson, Baxter and Blake, Baxter and Dylan Thomas, Baxter and Lawrence Durrell, to say nothing of that work already done on Baxter and Lowell or Baxter and ballads. Baxter's poetic relations to Burns, I will argue here, structure each aspect of his poetic career, and can be heard in unexpected places, most particularly as an unspoken companion to the poetry of the Jerusalem period.

Baxter, who as a pre-schooler grew up with his father 'quoting Burns and Byron' (*Poems* 66), was open about his debts to Burns and reflected on them regularly. 'The modern poet,' Baxter wrote in 1945, 'is not a species distinct, and may be taught by Burns as readily as by Eliot.' (McKay 90) This teaching involved a poetic stance or attitude as much as anything else, and in 1943 Baxter wrote to Noel Ginn that 'one who cannot appreciate Burns because he is on the whole traditional and sentimental is in my eyes a literary lost soul.' Indeed, as Ginn learnt a year or two later, it would be 'better to err with Burns and Byron than fall in line with Brasch;' and the young Baxter aspired to 'eventually gain something of the standpoint of Burns.' (Millar, *Spark* 242, 405, 406) This aspiration stayed with Baxter all through his life – he would write of 'the god of Robbie Burns' in a late poem, 'Letter to Max Harris' (*Poems* 451) – and forms, I will argue here, a central and abiding concern in his poetics and poetic project. Baxter's Burns was more than a poetic ancestor to be acknowledged; he was a point of reference and, via the statue of the Bard in Dunedin's Octagon, a piece of poetic occasion Baxter positioned and re-positioned himself around. Alistair Paterson remembers Baxter reciting Burns' poems in Wellington pubs in the early 1950s, and *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* was one of the few books on Baxter's shelf when he

was Burns Fellow at Otago (Drummond 25; McKay 209). At each stage of his poetic development Baxter had Burns as a point of reference. The Bard was a constant presence in his imaginative life. We can hear, if we listen closely enough, echoes of Burns at each moment of Baxter's own development and by the time of the last poems he found 'something of the standpoint of Burns,' not in the dull mannerisms of imitation but in a shared *stance*, an adapted poetics. Most of the evidence for this modelling has been hiding in plain sight, and can, if we linger a little longer over it, help us hear continuities and conversations at work across Baxter's verse.

Literary Relations

Baxter's relations to Burns have, in most criticism, been cast as forms of ancestral imagining, with Burns standing in for a wider Scottish inheritance. 'The affinity Baxter wished to assert' with Burns, Alan Riach suggests, was 'a tribal relation rather than a merely literary one.' (120) 'Throughout his life,' Riach argues, 'Baxter chose deliberately and selectively to privilege certain aspects of social identity which could be described as tribal' (112), and this led him to highlight his paternal links with Scotland and Scottish culture over his mother's more genteel, English and academic family connections. This selection had political consequences. 'Baxter's *choice* of tribal alternatives was often intended to be seen as a criticism of the normative Western bourgeois liberal social structures.' Riach continues:

Privileging the tribal aspect of his family history over the academic, making so much more of his Scottish Gaelic-speaking ancestors than he did of the solid academic tradition that adhered to his mother's side of the family, was a means by which Baxter could affirm a precedent for his adoption of Māori tribalism. (118)

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A *merely literary* relation: the diminished status Riach accords literary relations strikes me as odd, especially in the discussion of a poet of such passionate and wide-ranging debts and influences. Literary relations – the anxiety and thrill of influence, the conversation with ancestors – are surely central to any serious poet's sense of their own work and project, and the acoustic aspect of these relations – what sounds and phrases linger in the ear, what echoes occur – has been the occasion for much self-reflection and poetic production. Allen Curnow's poem 'An Abominable Temper' significantly *fuses* literary and ancestral relations, noting that 'Allen will get the Bible and the *Poems*' of Burns as part of his ancestral inheritance. (152) With Baxter, a poet for whom ancestry and tribe are such important subjects, literary relations and ancestral relations are more likely blurred than kept separate. Vincent O'Sullivan observes an 'affinity':

Baxter, to begin with, always felt an affinity with Robert Burns. He admired that poet of his own race who could turn from lyrical delicacy to full-blooded attack when the moment asked for it. (32)

This has the advantage of drawing our attention to poetic strategy and to the kind of options and vocal range Burns opened up for the young Baxter; but I will argue in this essay that O'Sullivan doesn't take his own case far enough. The clouds of sentimentality and slack mythology that still surround Burns for so many readers – the biscuit-tin reading, perhaps – can distract us from attending to the deep affinities between Baxter and Burns, and from the quite startling measure of Burns' own success. Growing up with the poet and adjusting his reading of him at each new stage in his own career, Baxter's Burns appears as an example of so many of the poetic types Baxter will aspire to become. Burns was a bi-cultural poet, writing with an ear to both his own Lowland Scottish, to the Anglicised culture of his education and to the newly-forming British identity the Union had produced (see Robert Crawford, *Devolving* 88-110). Baxter would in his later work attempt similar sorts of bi-cultural imagination. Burns' poetry is deliberately mixed and 'impure,' shifting between high and low registers, mixing local words and obscenities with philosophical sophistication and exalted vocabulary. It is also bi-lingual, as he produced poems both in Scottish and, albeit less successfully, in English. Baxter's work was always similarly 'impure' and linguistically athletic, and if the red book 'from which [he] should learn Māori' stayed shut (*Poems* 460), a Māori-English linguistic reimagining of Pākehā culture is a clear ambition of the late poems. These parallels and affinities suggest richly complex literary relations between Baxter and Burns.

Winds of Fruitfulness: Identifying Poetry

In his 1963 'Letter to Robert Burns' Baxter raises 'a brother's horn' to the other poet (*Poems* 289), suggesting a relation more horizontal, equal and imaginative-collaborative than vertical, ancestral or patriarchal-tribal. Baxter's reading of Burns went deeper than admiration or affinity and was characterised throughout his career by a much more thorough-going process of assimilation and adaptation. Lines, sounds and forms from Burns echo all through Baxter's work. From the use of the difficult Standard Habbie stanza form (sometimes called the 'Burns Stanza') in 'The Thistle' through the Scottish words and subject-matter of 'The Debt' to the frequent use of verse letters and quotations within poems, Baxter's poetic tool kit was fitted out with Burnsian innovations. There are plenty of direct allusions too, including 'for all that and all that' in 'A Ballad for the Men of Holy Cross' – an echo of Burns' famous 'for a' that, an' a' that' in 'A Man's A Man for a' That' – and a hint of Burns' 'blow, blow ye winds!' in the early 'blow wind of fruitfulness.' (*Poems* 337, 41; *Canongate Burns* 494, 512) Burns' passions and obsessions with the natural world, with mortality and death are so often Baxter's, and Baxter's excoriation of 'Pig Island'

sexual hypocrisy and bourgeois deceit sounds echoes from Burns' mocking the 'unco guid's' 'better art o' hidin.' (192) Others have made these connections but then passed on: more needs to be made of them.

Robert Crawford's term 'identifying poets' offers a particularly useful frame for viewing the poetic relations between Baxter and Burns. Identifying poets, for Crawford, are 'poets who have made for themselves identities which let them be identified with, re-state and even renovate the identity of a particular territory,' and often they develop this identity 'with and for their own cultures through a fructifying engagement with another culture and literatures.' The identifying poet, as Crawford develops the term, produces work which is concerned with the task of identifying and its problems. Identifying poetry works to create accounts of land and location that can bring it into connection with a culture and a history. This task requires engagement, and the engagement is a source of literary and imaginative energy: 'it is only by remaining dynamic, by evolving, that a culture or a literary tradition continues to live. It is its loopholes, its openness to the "other" or "others" which allows it to re-view and develop itself.' (*Identifying* 1, 13) The advantage of thinking about the activity of 'identifying' as against the status of 'identity' is that it draws our attention to the *process* involved in the task, its status as an incomplete project requiring negotiation and self-reflection. Such focus is doubly useful in the context of Pākehā literature where the quest for 'the identity of a particular territory' takes place against the historical legacy of colonisation and alongside pre-existing Māori narratives and identities.²

It is obvious how Baxter, writing for 'the tribe that is not a tribe' (*Poems* 494), fits Crawford's model of the 'identifying poet.' Burns is also, Crawford suggests, 'one of the archetypal modern poets in his formation of a multiple self or selves' (*Identifying* 4), and the two poets share this shape-shifting, identity-constructing quality as their work negotiates dual languages, cultures and contested historical and geographical sites. The use of multiple names to indicate this shape-shifting – Baxter's development from Jim to Hemi, from Jum to Jimmy to James Q Oxter, Burns' punningly allusive signatures as Robert Ruisseaux or Rab the Ranter – indicate another affinity. Baxter took from Burns a sense of the poet's vocation and sources. Burns found his inspiration on the land and, in society, from the edges, writing to a correspondent: 'I have often coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of Blackguards, sometimes farther than was consistent with the safety of my character' (Thomas Crawford, 'Burns' 190) and he attributed a good deal of his inspiration to this company. Baxter generalises this Romantic stance:

Art [...] is not bred by culture but by its opposite: that level of hardship or awareness of moral chaos where the soul is too destitute to be able to lie to itself. (Isichei 246)

From this shared vantage point, Burns' and Baxter's work circles around a surprisingly similar set of themes: the land, cultural identity, especially the possibilities of the bi-cultural and bi-lingual poetic form. Tracing Baxter's Burns, the Burns that emerges from his work and the relations they produce can offer us a guide to shifts in Baxter's own poetics. What starts out as an ancestral figure develops in the writing into a poetic model. Baxter's Burns turns, to use Robert Crawford's phrase, from a piece of the poet's identity into a poetic occasion for *identifying*. The shift affects each stage in Baxter's career.

The Taieri: 'As tartan clans'

'I would glorify / Innumerable men in whose breasts my heart once beat, / Is beating' (*Poems* 31): Baxter's earliest poems set out to honour a particular account of his family past and of Scottish settlement in Otago. The land, in these early poems, is bound up with European ancestry, and the imperative, unusual in his oeuvre, is deployed: 'Forget not those whom Scotland bred / Above whose bones our cities stand.' (*Poems* 32) The young man had a father who 'used to sit him on his knee and read him Burns, whose poems were almost his Bible' (McKay 26), and in these early poems he turns his reading out to describe the world around him.

'The Thistle' uses natural imagery to represent Scottish settlement and heritage and to make some sly observations on the trick of standing upright here. Baxter writes Standard Habbie – the verse form Burns perfected and made his own – with an ease all the more astonishing when one remembers the author was not yet twenty.³

 Their seeds within an alien land
 Cast heedful from a Scottish hand
 Have flowered a hundred years, to stand
 In their own right,
 Their gossamer by breezes fanned
 Airy as sunlight.

 I have forgiven, nor upbraid
 That they so ruinous invade
 Valley and homestead, green arrayed
 As tartan clans –
 Full arrogant with ready blade
 On all that's Man's.

(‘The Thistle,’ *Poems* 50)

These early conversations with Burns, though, for all their metrical dexterity are for the most part relatively unsophisticated meditations: Baxter's identification with the 'tartan clans' is clear and uncomplicated. In 1951 he restated in prose some of the arguments he had made in the 1944 verse:

a hundred years is long enough for our society to have acquired a shape of its own. And not always by a complete break with the situation of our ancestors. The peasant clansmen of the Western Highlands of Scotland became the clannish farmers of Otago. The Otago hills and sea coast are not unlike the hills and sea coast of Argyllshire. So I have been fortunate enough to find the readymade myth of longbearded Gaelic-speaking giants distilling whisky among the flax from time immemorial. The ancestral face is very familiar to me. (*Recent Trends* 7)

This initial immersion in Burns helps explain Baxter's astonishing lyrical self-confidence and ready mythologising stance. The 'readymade myth' he makes for himself in these early works is not enough to carry the weight of his later ambitions but it allows him to bypass then-prevalent 'never a soul at home' anxieties. The audacity of Baxter's first act of 'identifying poetry' involves him transplanting Burns and Burns' context and insisting that they are familiar to Otago. Compare this familiarity and the standing 'in their own right' of Baxter's Standard Habbie with Curnow's more strained account of Dunedin's relationship to Scotland in 'Dunedin – for James K. Baxter':

There, none wills
Redress or dreams it, or pondering some lapse
Out of a dream strays back into that town
A mirage of the cracked antarctic stole,
Or stumbles on the original dazed stone
Pitched out of Scotland to the opposite Pole.

(Curnow 200)

Baxter is much too sure-footed to stumble 'among these hills' (*Poems* 32) and where Curnow reads dislocation and confusion in the Scottish-Otago juxtaposition ('dazed stone' and 'straying' dreams) Baxter's is a self-confident image of a 'shape of its own.' Whatever the ethical and imaginative inadequacy in this initial identifying act, it offered Baxter a confident and clear starting-point for his later, more complex work.

Occasional notes of anxiety break through – 'And Scotland was my spiritual home, / Or so it seemed' runs a line in the 'Letter to Noel Ginn' (*Poems* 29) – but the earliest of Baxter's

engagements with Burns and Burns' context are generally happy to remain at the level of identification rather than engagement. We can read the suggestion that the Otago hills are 'not unlike' Argyll metonymically for what the later verse will reject as an example of spiritual and cultural sickness: Pākehā refusal to recognise Aotearoa's distinctive history and the indigenous claims and relations to land that pre-date Pākehā ones.

All that comes later though, and the first development in Baxter's dialogue with Burns must be a more limited, negative and seemingly anti-Romantic one. In 1951 Baxter outlines poetry's apparent exhaustion and impossibility in a deftly dialectical verse, and at the same time positions himself to take up Burns' role, this time as a consciously worked inheritance. 'The Immortals':

Less than the wind's rant now
Red Hugh, Little John
Too handy with a gun;
Clods cover the randy
Bullnecked Ayrshireman
Who sent cannon to the French –
And who'll fill their bench?

Could I with pentagon, candle,
Gather ghost, limb,
As they stood in manhood's prime,
We'd drink till Truth glimmered
Over the glass's rim;
And at cockcrow's judgement
Count the night well spent.

But truth's out of fashion.
Why should a man beat
His brain for rhymes, and sweat?
Add shilling to shilling
And walk the flat street:
Keep door and window sealed
When the wind's wild.

(Poems 99)

By alluding to Burns as the man who ‘sent cannon to the French’ and thus drawing attention to Burns’ political activity, Baxter brings him into a more immediate relation with the present as an example of political daring and potential poetic and political radicalism (see Thomas Crawford, *Burns*, cn. 7). He was also showing himself to be some decades in advance of most Burns scholarship, which has only in the last few decades fully acknowledged the extent of Burns’ radical democratic political engagement.⁴ Baxter’s family background and literary upbringing provided him with the raw materials to build his own work but his relationship to Burns needed to be worked over before he could use it fully in his own poetic projects. ‘The Immortals’ begins this process by casting Burns as an example that contemporary poetry fails to follow (‘truth’s out of fashion’) and by setting himself up as an inheritor of the tradition: the rhetorical question ‘who’ll fill their bench?’ may be answered negatively by the rest of the poem but the very context of articulation in a poem and the act of questioning lead the reader to see Baxter as pursuing what he feigns to refuse. If the poetry of the 1940s positions Burns as one of the ancestors then this poem of the 1950s draws on him for poetry’s contemporary demands. It will take a realisation in the 1960s – that ‘the Māori owned the land’ (*Poems* 279) – and with it an abandonment of imagery of Scottish-New Zealand *identity* for these two parts of Baxter’s Burns to be integrated and for him to be able to put his poetic ‘brother’ to use.

The Leith: ‘a tribesman cut off from his tribe’

For anyone associated with Dunedin, Robert Burns is not just an imaginary relation but also a very physical one. His statue in the Octagon marks the city’s distinctive relationship with Victorian Scotland⁵ and several times in the 1960s Baxter uses the Burns statue to re-negotiate his own connections to Burns and Burns’ place in his imaginative world. When a student at Otago University Baxter would often ‘look to the statue of Burns, with his back to the big cathedral and his face to the Oban Hotel, for approval and consolation.’ (*The Man* 93) Two poems of the 1960s – ‘Letter to Robert Burns’ (1963) and ‘A Small Ode on Mixed Flattering’ (1967) – address the statue directly and in doing so allow Baxter the chance to re-position himself and his poetry as part of a conversation with his model identifying poet.

Pig Island Letters made more explicit than before Baxter’s conviction that ‘a poet is / The sore thumb of the tribe’ (*Poems* 268), and ‘Letter to Robert Burns’ identifies Burns as a fellow dissident, another outsider figure. This is the poem where Baxter is closest in his *poetic* (rather than ancestral) identification with Burns. The two poet ‘brothers’ share as outsiders the restrictions of self and society: ‘King Robert with the horn of stone! / Perhaps your handcuffs were my own.’ Baxter imagines Burns’ romantic and alcoholic dilemmas:

If, lying in the pub latrine,

You muttered, 'Take me back to Jean,'
The reason for your mandrake groans
Is wrapped like wire around my bones.

(*Poems* 290-91)

Baxter's Romantic anti-academic stance – 'Biology, mythology, / Go underground when the bookmen preach' (*Poems* 291) – matches some moods of Burns:

What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,
Your Latin names for horns an' stools?
If honest nature made you *fools*
 What sairs your Grammers?
Ye'd better taen up *spades* and *shools*
 Or *knappin-hammers*.

(*Canongate Burns* 135)

What is significant about the 'Letter' is the way that Baxter for the first time combines ideological and poetic identification with a recognition of cultural distance. When in 1944 he saw flowers 'from a Scottish hand' standing 'in their own right,' by 1963 he places himself as a 'stranger' in Burns' Scottish cultural context:

Robert, only a heart I bring,
No gold of words to grace a king,
Nor can a stranger lift that flail
That cracked the wall of Calvin's jail
And earned you the lead garland of
A people's moralising love,
Till any Scotsman with the shakes
Can pile on your head his mistakes
And petrify a boozaroo
Reciting *Tam O'Shanter* through

(*Poems* 290)

Baxter asserts his poetic authority to read Burns against the 'lead garland' of moralising and misreading – indeed, three years on from this poem's composition he will offer his own reading of

‘Tam O’Shanter’ and through it map out his political vision – but unlike his youthful work the ‘Letter’ marks a clear distance between the poet ‘stranger’ and the ‘Scotsman with the shakes’ as they relate to the Scottish poet. The distance this brings between poet and subject matter, one of Crawford’s ‘loopholes’ for the ‘identifying poet’, allows Baxter to sound ideas and positions off Burns, to set Burns up as a model Baxter. Opposing knowledge to the ‘iron boot of education,’ identifying a ‘snake-haired Muse’ connected to poetry, sexuality and wild otherness against respectability, and opposing these to ‘Calvin’s jail’ and Puritanism the ‘Letter’ rehearses what will become familiar Baxterian themes and rehearses them against the example of Burns. When the ‘Letter’ announces that ‘Biology, mythology, / Go underground when the bookmen preach’ Baxter also introduces two elements from what will become for him a poetic keyword: tribe.

Before 1960 the word ‘tribe’ appears only once in Baxter’s published writing and in a context where it is not referring to Pākehā. In 1963 it appears for the first time as a word to be applied to Pākehā in ‘The Dragon Mask.’ After that it appears by my count thirty-two times, twenty-three of them after 1968. By contrast the word ‘clan’ appears three times – twice in work of the 1940s, once in a poem of 1951 – and appears nowhere in Baxter’s poetry after 1951.⁶ This shift in vocabulary has clear political and cultural connotations. Clan, according to the *OED* derives from Scottish Gaelic and has traditionally been used to describe groups related by ancestry or marriage; in New Zealand English it is used to refer to non-Māori societies. Tribe, at least before *iwi* and *hāpu* became common terms in English usage, usually describes Māori society or what Pākehā understand of Māori society.⁷ ‘Tribe’ became the great connotative keyword in Baxter’s late imagining of Pākehā identity: ‘The founding of a tribe,’ ‘the tribe of nga mokai,’ ‘the roll call of the tribe,’ ‘the drunks are my own tribe’ (*Poems* 468, 507, 509, 510). Time and again in the late poems the word ‘tribe’ is at the centre of a poem’s imaginative order and carries the utopian energy and charge of Baxter’s new ‘identifying poetry’ of potential Pākehā location and place. This word, carrying a heavy ideological and spiritual burden in the imaginative schemes of the later poems, first appears as part of Baxter’s conversation with Burns.

In 1951 Baxter told the New Zealand Writers’ Conference that he had ‘readymade myths’ from the ‘clansmen of the Western Highlands.’ By 1967, in lectures delivered in his role as Burns Fellow, both the word ‘clan’ and the sense of unproblematic identification with Scottish myths have been replaced by a more troubled tone and by a more complex and rewarding ‘tribal’ identification that recognises its own problems and the contested national and historical legacy it is operating within. There is a well-nigh Brechtian alienation effect occurring in these lectures as a Pākehā writer uses in place of the familiar term (clan) with all its denotative certainties a term (tribe) used to that point almost exclusively to denote Māori and for most of his audience carrying connotations of Māori life. Riach’s comment about tribal and literary relations misses the poetic complexity in the 1967 context of a Pākehā writer using the term tribe. The word is out ahead of the concept, making

it new. The more complex Jerusalem-era images of cultural relations find their gestation in these meditations on Burns and Scottishness. Discussing his ancestors in 1967 Baxter described an artist as ‘a tribesman cut off from his tribe [...] I stand then as a tribesman left over from the dissolution of a tribe.’ (*The Man* 12) Accepting that the tribe has been dissolved and that the ‘readymade myths’ cannot be sustained, Baxter faces the dilemma: ‘what can a tribesman do when he has no tribe?’

For me it is not death itself but the knowledge of death that makes me reach out to *the tribe that no longer exists*. As I have done time and again in imagination, looking for some fragment of the lost unity on which to build a poem, but now for a different reason, I go along the river track towards that gully where the clan built their houses. (*The Man* 28; my emphasis)

Baxter’s slippage from tribe to clan here reveals the strain and the full linguistic and ideological strangeness and originality of his own re-imagining. As part of this re-imagining Burns, whose work Baxter tells his audience he has ‘loved’ all his life, is presented both as an alternative poetic resource to Englishness and as a part of a tribal connection: ‘he is much nearer to me than Shakespeare [...] a tribal gift, the book by which I could communicate with the dead.’ (*The Man* 91) For all its talk of ancestry, these passages from *The Man on the Horse* point towards new poetic connections: what, after all, will be the radical impulse of the *Jerusalem Sonnets* and *Autumn Testament* but to imagine what sort of poetic ‘tribal gifts’ could produce cross-cultural relations of the kind captured in the image of ‘a faceless face, Māori or Pākehā either // As the light catches it’ (*Poems* 472)? Many critics have read these lectures for the insights they offer to Baxter’s poetics and social vision: it deepens our understanding of this vision if we remember that his points are made not in a generalising or explicitly polemical context but as part of his ongoing conversation with Burns.

The shift from ‘clan’ to ‘tribe’ is one indication of a shift in Baxter’s use of Burns, and after the negative work of de- or re-mythologising in ‘The Immortals’ and ‘Letter to Robert Burns’ the 1967 lectures allowed Baxter the chance to position Burns in a poetic relation to the more explicitly social programmatic task his own later verse would set itself. ‘Tam O’Shanter,’ he told his audience, ‘has lain at the bottom of my mind for thirty years, a fable of Everyman brought from the mind of the tribe by a great poet.’ (*The Man* 119) Setting Burns up as a great poet able to summon fables from ‘the mind of the tribe’ places him in an active and identifying relation to the present, and in the 1967 writings Baxter is able to start this sort of strategic deployment of Burns. Having sharpened his poetic relations through early negative dialectic (‘Clods cover the randy / Bullnecked Ayrshireman’), Baxter can now put Burns to present use. At a 1966 rally against the Vietnam War, ‘Baxter assured the crowd of some four hundred that had Burns been alive, he

would have been on their side.’ (McKay 212) The 1967 lecture ‘The Man on the Horse’ is given over to an analysis of Burns’ great poem ‘Tam O’Shanter’:

Care, mad to see a man sae happy,
E’en drown’d himsel amang the nappy;
As bees flee ham wi’ lades o’ treasure,
The minutes wing’d their way wi’ pleasure:
Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious,
O’er a’ the ills o’ life victorious!

(*Canongate Burns* 397)

It soon becomes obvious that Baxter’s analysis is not a reading of Burns at all but a reading of Burns’ poetics in the light of Baxter’s own developments and plans. He is, as so often in his work, sounding off Burns the better to hear his own thoughts:

‘a’ the ills o’ life’ [...] a cold pressure never absent from the adult mind; and this burden is cast off for a moment, not just by intoxication, but by what it stands for – the Roman *fraternitas*, the Māori *aroha*, the appearance or reality of group love, a merging in the collective warmth of the tribe. (*The Man* 104-05)

The value of love or *aroha* as ‘the collective warmth of the tribe’ will become a dominant note in Baxter’s verse and social commentary: it first emerges as part of a meditation on Burns. Burns is produced as a ‘great poet’ able to bring this fable of love ‘from the mind of the tribe’: again he is placed in an active and identifying relationship. That Baxter’s reading of ‘Tam O’Shanter’ is hardly convincing as Burns criticism is beside the point. What matters in these lectures is the way Baxter uses a great Burns poem as an occasion for his own poetic re-positioning. ‘A Small Ode on Mixed Flattering’ from the same year as the important lecture deploys Burns in a similarly programmatic fashion:

But Robert Burns, that sad old rip
From whom I got my Fellowship
Will grunt upon his rain-washed stone
Above the empty Octagon,
And say – ‘O that I had the strength
To slip yon lassie half a length!
Apollo! Venus! Bless my ballocks!
Where are the games, the hugs, the frolics?’

Are all you bastards melancholics?
Have you forgotten that your city
Was founded well in bastardry
And half your elders (God be thankit)
Were born the wrong side of the blanket?
You scholars, throw away your books
And learn your songs from lasses' looks
As I did once' – Ah, well; it's grim;
But I will have to censor him.
He liked to call a spade a spade
And toss among the glum and staid
A poem like a hand grenade –

(Poems 397)

This poem involves a complex ventriloquism in its mixing of familiar and new themes and emphases. There is also a careful vagueness or double-meaning to games, hugs and frolics, a vagueness of a kind that will be developed in the poetry of the Jerusalem era: 'A Small Ode on Mixed Flattering' manages to be at once about sex and ostensibly about non-sexual physicality and affection. The sexual energy and its opposition to the hypocrisy of the authorities draws on both Burns and Baxter's earlier work, as does the confidence in the poet's social vocation, to toss 'a poem like a hand grenade' amongst the complacency or indifference of the social world. At the same time Baxter has Burns voice two new themes that will dominate the next stage of his own work. His plea for scholars to throw away their books is more emphatic and absolute than earlier anti-academic moments and anticipates his soon to be announced plan for a place 'where the people, both Māori and Pākehā, would try to live without money or books, worship God and work on the land.' (McKay 237) Baxter's Burns poses a question – 'where are the games, the hugs, the frolics?' – that expands a long-standing critique of social coldness and Puritanism. Earlier poems had attacked that legacy; the Burns statue's ventriloquised call for games, hugs and frolics anticipates a very visible part of the social project of Baxter's last years. McKay:

One public expression of aroha was the celebrated Jerusalem hug. Baxter would bear down on people and envelop them in his arms. Outside Jerusalem the hairy guru he had become caused physical consternation to those uncomfortable with physical contact. Hugging was part of the hippie culture. (263)

In 1967 'A Small Ode on Mixed Flattering' and lecture 'The Man on the Horse' both use Burns, then, to indicate new directions. By the end of 1968 it was clear that these new directions could

not be pursued in Dunedin: 'My dreams do not go South.' ('Valediction,' *Poems* 432) Baxter's final, more indirect though more thoroughly integrated engagement with Burns, I want to finish by suggesting, is to be found in his own most self-consciously 'identifying' poetry.

The Whanganui: 'founding a tribe'

What is the distinctive tone of the poetry of the Jerusalem era? A number of descriptive terms have been suggested – demotic, folk, plain language, writing coming down off 'its high romantic stilts' (Stead 10) – and whatever the aspect identified most accounts of these works see in them breaks with past practice. This poetic break has wider implications. As John Newton notes: 'the Baxter of the Jerusalem era achieved what for a New Zealand poet remains unrivalled celebrity. And in this re-invention 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 social activist.' ('The Baxter Effect' 11) This social activist stance is amongst other things an integration of his long-standing poetic relations with Burns. After a passing reference in 'Letter to Max Harris' (1969) to 'the god of Robert Burns' (*Poems* 455) there are no more explicit references to the Bard in Baxter's work, but his example – especially when we remember Baxter's frequent testimonies to his life-long engagement with Burns – can be heard everywhere.

Consider the first of the *Jerusalem Sonnets*:

The small grey cloudy louse that nests in my beard
Is not, as some have called it, 'a pearl of God' -

No, it is a fiery tormentor
Waking me at two a.m.

Or thereabouts, when the lights are still on
In the houses in the pa, to go across thick grass

Wet with rain, feet cold, to kneel
For an hour or two in front of the red flickering

Tabernacle light – what He sees inside
My meandering mind I can only guess -

A madman, a nobody, a raconteur
Whom He can joke with – 'Lord,' I ask Him,

‘Do You or don’t You expect me to put up with lice?’
His silent laugh still shakes the hills at dawn.

(*Poems* 455)

This is not usually the poetry we reach for when we think of examples of Baxter’s relations with Burns’ inheritance. But in many ways these lines mark a deep re-imagining of the Burns role and the Burns stance for the oppositional needs the Jerusalem era demanded.

We can hear across the Jerusalem-era poetry what we in the twenty-first century have come to call an ecological vision, something Baxter and Burns both share. ‘The simple bard, rough at the rustic plough’ (*Canongate Burns* 177) stands behind the ecological imagery of the *Jerusalem Sonnets*: ‘Many many think it out of date / That I should bend my back in a field’ (*Poems* 458). The spirituality of the sonnets is connected to their presentation of a particular relationship to land and labour:

Yesterday I planted garlic,
Today, sunflowers – ‘the non-essentials first’

Is a good motto

(*Poems* 463)

Which in turn echoes Burns’ complexly formed connections between Christianity, nature and learning:

Give me a spark o’ Nature’s fire,
That’s a’ the learning I desire;
Then, tho’ I drudge thro’ drab an’ mire
 At pleugh or cart,
My Muse, tho’ hamely in attire,
 May touch the heart.

(*Canongate Burns* 132)

The ‘small grey cloudy louse’ in Baxter’s beard echoes another louse, the ‘ugly, creepan, blasted wonner’ of Burns’ ‘To a Louse.’ Lice are for both poets images of the waywardness and

physicality of existence, and both use it to develop an ideal of a Christianity based on honesty, in opposition to hypocrisy and social cant, and based on self-knowledge and love. Spotting the ‘crowlan ferlie’ leads Burns to wonder:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To *see oursel as others see us!*
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An’ foolish notion:
What airs in dress an’ gait wad lea’e us,
An’ ev’n Devotion!

(‘To a Louse,’ *Canongate* 132)

The informality of this image has both a thematic importance and a role in creating what Newton calls the ‘conversational’ mode of address in the later work. (‘The Baxter Effect’ 13) Baxter favoured the verse letter from the beginning of his career but it becomes a much more prominent form in the last years, and again the modelling from Burns becomes clear in comparison. Burns used his interlocutors – his verse Epistles and Epitaphs, and his extensive correspondence with various supporters, friends, and lovers – to create for himself a world of poetic civility and equality where his ideas and poems could find community, in verse versions of eighteenth-century clubs and societies, something hard to come by for their author in the politically constricted world of Hanoverian Scotland. Baxter borrows the move for similar political ends. In addressing Colin Durning, Sam Hunt, Frank McKay, Peter Olds, Eugene O’Sullivan, John Weir and others, Baxter created for himself a world of informal company where ideas and utopian impulses could circulate, providing the poetry with both the immediacy and directness of friendly communication and the social civility of friendship. Like Burns’, Baxter’s was a notably masculine (and masculinist) verse community; for all the other pressures from the times that the Jerusalem era poems register, they are remarkably untouched by the upheaval in gender relations and battles for women’s liberation. Like Burns also, it is notable that the bulk of Baxter’s late writing did not appear until after his death. Part of the private posture of a verse letter is, to be sure, posturing, as the poem reaches a wider audience, but part of it in both poets was genuine, and many of Baxter’s later poems were sent to friends with little formal thought as to their publishing destiny (see Millar, *Intro. to Autumn Testament*).

These echoes and similarities are important but, more than any stylistic instance of affinity, it is in the cultural and poetic *modelling* of the late poems that Burns’ presence can be most clearly felt. I mentioned Burns’ bi-lingualism and bi-culturalism above, and while it would be absurd to suggest these as major motivating factors in Baxter’s own poetic direction, it is surely important for his

last works' shaping that he had grown up as a poet in constant contact with bi-lingual and bi-cultural poetry of this kind. The Māori words in *Jerusalem Sonnets* are hardly an example of bi-lingual poetry⁸ but that is where their utopian impulse and energies point, and they have a poetic relation to the complexly bi-lingual Scottish and English poems of Burns. The language of Baxter's last poems struggles to find a location for its own authenticity, placing words in Māori, youth slang ('he kept his cool, man' *Poems* 446), religious devotion and proper names against the official language of bureaucracy and 'mainstream' Pākehā culture:

I am only half sane
But the sane half tells me that newspapers were made

For wiping arses and covering tables,
Not for reading – now, man, I have a table cloth.

(*Poems* 462)

In wiping his arse with the language of official culture Baxter asks where the location of authentic culture is to be found. He engages in what Robert Crawford, discussing Burns, calls 'vernacular negotiations with cultural authority.' (*Burns and Cultural Authority* x)

What has been the impact of these negotiations? For Ian Wedde, Baxter's work:

has done more than anything else in our literature to bring into balance, for us and in us,
that precariously alert yet instinctive sense of internal relation between *who* and *where*,
between language and location: the culture of what *is*. (44)

That Baxter may have learnt at least part of this sense through years of close reading and attention to a poet for whom 'language and location' were abiding concerns adds an extra dimension to our understanding of his own poetic lineage. Burns was striving for an adequate balance between the *who* of poetic self-fashioning and the *where* of a repressively anti-democratic and kirk-dominated Ayrshire, working at the relations between the uncertain *who* of Scottishness and the newly organised *where* of post-Union Britain between the languages of English and Scottish and the locations of Ayr, Edinburgh and Dumfries. This was a lucky inheritance for a Pākehā poet trying to re-imagine the ethics, poetics and politics of his own spirituality, language and location.

'And when the river fog rises'

My aim in this essay has been more analytical than evaluative and I have tried to show some of the details of the literary relations between Baxter and Robert Burns. There has been implicit in my organisation a teleological scheme, as Baxter's writing around Burns proceeds from the identification of the early work through the de-mythologising and distancing complexities of the poems of the 1960s and comes to a conclusion in the fully integrated local voice of the Jerusalem era. To illustrate this movement in the poems does not tell us anything though, about their *success*. Did Baxter's writing around with 'the culture of what *is*' achieve this success? *Does it work?*

But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving *foresight* may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' *Mice* an' *Men*
Gang aft agley,
An' leave us nought but grief an' pain,
For promised joy!

('To a Mouse,' *Canongate* 96)

A full assessment of the ethical and spiritual 'schemes' of the Jerusalem era falls outside the scope of an essay like this. The difficulties they pose for us as contemporary readers though may stand as a final affinity between Baxter and Burns. Edwin Muir, writing in 1949, declared that 'for a Scotsman to see Burns simply as a poet is almost impossible.' (57) Reading and thinking about Burns is always, whatever the wishes of even the most formalist or New Critical of readers, at the same time reading and thinking about Scottish culture in general, about the status of the Scottish language, about the place of the Bard in the national mythology. In a similar manner, for a Pākehā to see Baxter simply as a poet is almost impossible because the obsessions of his work – to do with Pākehā recognition of Māori, unresolved questions of land and ownership and identity and possession – are obsessions with a cultural and political charge still quite active today. Baxter, like Burns, is a culturally contested figure.

If in some moods his poetry strikes the contemporary reader as too casual in its assumptions of how easily Pākehā may approach the Māori world ('Sestina of the River Road' asks of God to 'grant me a hut in the Māori paddock' *Poems* 590); at other moments there is in Baxter a recognition that the sort of relations the poems envisage are *anticipatory*, requiring the labour of time, negotiation and the imaginative leaps of identifying poetry:

I must go, my friends,
Into the dark, the cold, the first beginning
Where the ribs of the ancestors are the rafters

Of a meeting house – windows broken
And the floor white with bird dung – in there
The ghosts gather who will instruct me
And when the river fog rises
Te ra rite tonu te Atua –
The sun who is like the Lord
Will warm my bones, and his arrows
Will pierce to the centre of the shapeless clay of the mind.

(‘A Pair of Sandals,’ *Poems* 600-01)

There are windows to be fixed, bird dung to be swept away: there is in other words work to be done, labour requiring the properly de-colonised relations the earlier poems promised. But there is waiting to be done too, for the river fog to rise, for the sun to shine. The political and ethical obligations Baxter’s poems imply need to be assessed with this anticipation in mind, and in a different register to how we would think through the pamphlet or the manifesto. Writing about ‘Burns’ art speech,’ Seamus Heaney observes:

We can prefigure a future by re-imagining our pasts. In poetry, however, this prefiguring is venturesome and suggestive, more like a melodic promise than a social programme. It is not like a blueprint for a better world which might spring from the mind of a social engineer. Rather, it arises from the cravings of the spirit as expressed in language, in all of those patiences and impatiences which language embodies. (383)

‘A melodic promise’ to end with, then. Not Baxter’s Burns, but to stretch the word a little, Baxter’s *burns*, Baxter’s rivers, and the promise they hold for re-imagining the Pākehā past and working toward the impatient demands for recognition in the present:

only the voice of rivers,
Rakaia, Rangitata,
Ohau, Clutha,
and now the Wanganui
who washes my body
before its burial

(‘He Waiata mo taku Tangi,’ *Poems* 508)

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¹ I am not convinced that Baxter did anything as simple as 'adopt Māori tribalism.' Such a view would need rethinking in the light of John Newton's *The Double Rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Commune*.

² These are far from merely historical questions. Michael Laws' championing of Wanganui against Whanganui, while hardly poetic, shows why what might seem like the excessive care or self-consciousness in Crawford's phrasing is politically vital.

³ On the Standard Habbie see Dunn.

⁴ It is worth noting also that the important Burns scholar Thomas Crawford taught at Auckland University during part of Baxter's life, and chapters 5 and 6 of his *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* first appeared in *Landfall*, so we can assume that Baxter had at least seen them. Crawford also reviewed Baxter's *Howrah Bridge* in *Landfall* 64. Paul Millar suggests that 'it's quite likely Tom Crawford met Baxter on a number of occasions. Crawford and Bill Pearson were close friends, and Pearson was extremely close to Baxter and they'd often meet and drink together in Auckland – drinking sessions Crawford would attend.' (Personal communication)

⁵ This is a distinctive relationship more vexed than the City Council's promotional imagery always lets on, and if there is an 'Antipodean Antisyzygy' it is represented by the images of the two Burns statues: one a statue of a great democrat, libertine and sensualist, the other a tribute to the fanatically Puritanical Rev. Dr Burns of First Church, who found 'the name he bore was odious' and who claimed he would 'spend the rest of his days in repudiating the connection' between himself and his uncle (Alexander Duffield, *Recollections of Travels Abroad*, 1889, quoted in Dougherty 40). Thomas Burns was also honoured in 1892 with a statue in the Octagon; his uncle's remains but his own was taken down in 1949.

⁶ For 'clan' see *Poems* 31, 50, 114. For 'tribe' or 'tribal' in 1957, 181 (once), 1962, 250 (once), 1963, 268, 289 (twice), 1965, 318 (once), 1966, 336 (once), 1967, 394 (once), 1968, 425, 428 (twice), 1969, 458, 468,

471 (three times), 1971, 507, 510, 510, 509, 531, 531, (six times), 1972, 538, 550, 554, 560, 564, 568, 574, 574, 575, 581, 585, 590, 592 (thirteen times).

⁷ So, to confine my example to New Zealand works printed around the time Baxter was Burns Fellow, compare John Kidd, *The Sutherland Clan* (1969; Hocken Library Pamphlet OCO9K) and C R Willis and M Bathgate, *Genealogical Table of Anderson Branch of the Calder Clan* (1969; Hocken Library Pamphlet 090983711) with Matine Kereama, *The Tail of the Fish: Māori Memories of the Far North* (1968; Hocken Library Pamphlet KPP, WMK), noted as ‘a collection of legends of the Aupouri tribe’ or Best, *Tuhoe: The Children of the Mist*. For a contemporary use of ‘clan’ see Hunter.

⁸ I am using the terms bi-lingual and bi-cultural rather loosely, subordinate as they are here to ‘identifying’ poetry, which is always at work as a process and never at rest as an achieved state. But see Dennison.