

JACQUIE BAXTER / J.C. STURM
(1927-2009)

Paul Millar

In 1927 a daughter was born at Opunake in Taranaki to a young Maori couple named Mary and Jack Papuni. It was their second daughter, and they named her Te Kare, but the little girl would never know her mother, who died of septicemia a fortnight later. Deep in grief, Jack returned with their older daughter to his Whakatohea Iwi on the East Coast of the North Island, leaving the baby to be raised by her maternal grandmother.

As an infant, Te Kare Papuni suffered from a skin condition that required specialist dressing, a task regularly performed by a local Pakeha nurse named Ethel Sturm. When Te Kare's grandmother fell ill, Ethel and her husband Bert Sturm (of Ngati Porou), fostered and eventually adopted the little girl, re-christening her Jacqueline Cecilia Sturm. In the poem "In Loco Parentis", Jacque would recall how her mother's death sentenced her to a life lived between worlds. For twenty years the Sturms, "planted, nurtured / Trained, pruned, grafted me / Only to find a native plant / Will always a native be. // How being out of step, place, time, joint / In time became a preference / Not a pain, hardly matters now."

Jacque's developing preference for her marginal status can be explained in large part by the benefit to her writing of being out of step with the mainstream. Much of her prose and poetry is informed by the experience of negotiating a place between worlds, of managing uncomfortably overlapping cultural and personal identities. Her adoptive parents raised her in a predominately Pakeha world, in which she was usually the single brown face in any group. Although she felt 'a bit of a freak', and trained herself to keep her Maoriness private, her academic excellence saw her identified early as a hope for the Maori future.

While Jacque was still young the Sturms moved from Taranaki south to Pukerua Bay, and she spent girlhood in sight of the island of Kapiti, very near the place she would retire to and spend the last decades of her life. At the age of eleven she began writing poetry, initially as a diversion to get

through a long and tedious convalescence following a serious illness. The illness passed, but poetry remained a private pleasure and Jacquie continued to write of experience in a simple, lyrical style. A watershed moment occurred in her late teens when she visited Maori communities in the Urewera country and the Bay of Plenty—her father’s people—and discovered first hand the disparities between Pakeha and Maori in New Zealand. It was on the basis of this experience that she agreed to take on the aspirations of Maori and put her education to use by training to be a doctor. In 1946, aged nineteen, she moved even further south, enrolling at the University of Otago on a Health Department bursary to study medicine.

In Dunedin, as the only Maori woman on campus, Jacquie felt highly conspicuous. But she worked hard and performed superbly, narrowly missing entry to medical school due to quotas favouring returned servicemen. Men back from war service could gain admission to medical school with a bare pass, but the bar for younger students was around 95%, and Jacquie fell short of gaining Medical Intermediate by scoring 92%. She tried again the following year, scraping by financially on family support, part-time work and an anonymous donation, and aiming for an Arts degree good enough to guarantee entry to Medical school. This time she was successful, but having found in the Arts’ papers unexpected intellectual stimulation she decided her real interest was Anthropology and began considering graduate study in that area instead of Medicine. However Anthropology wasn’t a strong discipline at Otago and pursuing it further meant going to Canterbury University to study under the noted Professor Sutherland. She did so in late 1947 and shortly afterwards a young poet named James K. Baxter, whom she had been seeing in Otago, followed her.

Baxter associated with a literary and artistic group in Christchurch that included Bill Pearson, Colin McCahon, Denis Glover, Allen Curnow and many others. While Jacquie preferred to remain at the edge of Baxter’s orbit, and kept to the periphery of the group, she grew closer to Pearson (who also felt like an outsider because of his concealed homosexuality) and they developed a quiet friendship. In 1948 Pearson took over the editorship of the Canterbury University College student newspaper *Canta* and appointed Baxter its literary editor. Jacquie, who had published work in Dunedin’s student newspaper, submitted poems to *Canta* which, without fail, Baxter formally rejected. But when Baxter returned briefly to Dunedin that September, Pearson took over editing the literary page and printed poems Jacquie had submitted alongside one of Baxter’s—the only time they shared a page as poets in Baxter’s lifetime.

The difference between James K. Baxter’s and J.C. Sturm’s early poetic styles is startling. Baxter’s ‘City of God’ is grandiose and sonorous, a Miltonic oration that hasn’t endured well:

He wrought the crags whose ice-bound awe oppresses;
His eons woke the fountains of the deep;

And in the vast and star-crowned wildernesses

His fingers made our spirits out of sleep.

(*Canta*, 29 Sept. 1948: 4)

By contrast ‘Spring Song’, by ‘J.C.’, is delicate and lyrical, setting death and the processes of the natural world in subtle tension, utilising the personal and introspective voice that characterises much of Jacquie’s later poetry. The poem is unlike anything Baxter was writing at the time, and provides convincing evidence that while his dedication to art may have influenced J.C. Sturm’s work habits, her style was always her own.

Spring Song

Oh certainly it has been a fine day,
so fine I went walking on laughing stones
all laughing at my brain-clock hands
whirling round for a purpose never there
and never likely to be, only tick-tock.

Passing by a gay tree-judge I was tried,
condemned and hung full of care from a careless
twig with a blossom round my neck; quartered
by a sunbeam and hymned by a thrush
with a flooding throat, no tick-tock.

Till a green wind blew me cold into
a daffodil grave to bury my winter there;
rolled in an earth bed under a sun
blanket, was happy to grow as cabbages
grow, knowing nothing of tick-tock, no.

(*Canta*, 29 Sept. 1948: 4)

On 9 December 1948, despite strong parental disapproval, James K. Baxter and Jacqueline Cecilia Sturm married in St John’s Cathedral, Napier. They immediately moved from Christchurch to Wellington, settling in a small cottage out in the Western Hutt Valley, where their daughter Hillary was born in June 1949. Jacquie completed her BA, but found married life hard as their cottage received no winter sun and she developed rheumatics in her hands, while Baxter developed a drinking problem. Despite these difficulties she then went on to complete an MA in Philosophy—the first Maori woman to do so—with her dissertation on ‘New Zealand National Character as Exemplified in Three New Zealand Novelists’, commended for exceptional merit and awarded first class honours.

Baxter's dedication to writing was a revelation to Jacquie, but her own poetry suffered by association with her husband, and when an editor offended her by suggesting Baxter assisted her writing, she turned to prose, using J.C. Sturm as her pen name to avoid all association. In 1954 her story 'The Old Coat' appeared in *Numbers*. A year later 'For All the Saints' became the first story in English by a Maori writer to appear in *Te Ao Hou*. When C.K. Stead included 'For All the Saints' in *New Zealand Short Stories* (1966) she became the first Maori writer selected for a New Zealand anthology. Her stories enact an unequal and discomfited social world.

Through the fifties home-life deteriorated; Baxter's drinking was already a serious problem by the time their son John arrived in October 1952. His involvement with AA dried him out, but paradoxically created a new allegiance that left Jacquie feeling abandoned. When he made an unheralded decision in 1957 to convert to Roman Catholicism they separated, reuniting in 1958 to live for some months in India after Baxter received a UNESCO Fellowship. Separation became permanent in 1969 when Baxter left to found a commune at Jerusalem on the Whanganui River. He died in late 1972, and was buried in the urupa at Jerusalem after a full tangi.

Baxter's immersion in Maoridom in the last years of his life owes much to Jacquie's influence. Since the 1950s she had been part of Ngati Poneke and the Maori Women's Welfare League. As she reports in a 1997 interview with Bruce Morrison, "I became pretty involved with the concert party. I went to hui, Maori competitions. And I'd take the children. The children joined ... Jim would come when he could."

After Baxter's death, Jacquie focused on her family. In 1970 she found work at the Wellington Public Library, a position she held for many years while also raising Hillary's daughter Stephanie. Her collected stories, ready for book publication since 1966, languished and she didn't write more for over a decade. It was at the Wellington Public Library that Witi Ihimaera came to know her, and in 1982 he and Don Long placed two of her stories in their anthology of Maori writing, *Into the World of Light*. The following year the women's publishing collective Spiral produced her stories as *The House of the Talking Cat* (rpt. Steele Roberts, 2003) with reviewers praising the collection and Ihimaera hailing her in a review as a 'pivotal presence in the Maori literary tradition'. *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* describes her stories as 'succinct and lucid':

... upon first reading they appear to embrace the era's dominant ethos – that New Zealanders were one nation – by avoiding specific reference to Maori. However, read against the grain of thought that expected, in Sturm's words, all Maori 'to become respectable middle-class citizens, a lighter shade of brown, as it were', it becomes clear that the society she depicts fosters inequality, and her work conveys a strong and poignant sense of alienation. Her female

narrators, although rarely defined by their race, are marginalised figures that give a vivid sense of the constriction and restrictions of a young woman's life in Wellington in the 1950s. (Aorewa McLeod and Paul Millar, "Sturm, J.C." in Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (eds), *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1998, p. 518.)

In retirement Jacquie returned to her first love, poetry, and in 1996 Steele Roberts published her inaugural collection, *Dedications*, which earned the Honour Award for Poetry in the 1997 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. *Postscripts* followed in 2000, and a mixed selection of poetry and prose, *The Glass House*, in 2006. Jacquie's role as a pioneering Maori literary figure was recognized in 2003 when Victoria University made her an honorary Doctor of Literature. Her output may seem modest on paper, but it becomes substantial when set against the obstacles placed before her as a woman, wife, and mother and, for many years, her family's primary earner. Although Jacquie Baxter never wanted to be a role model, she never shirked her responsibility as a voice for Maori people and a campaigner against racial inequality. Her life and writing are testament to a woman of great integrity and quiet courage who helped clear the path that younger writers have followed to greater success and recognition.

Life delivered Jacquie a final cruel blow in 2009 when Stephanie, her much loved grand-daughter and primary caregiver, died suddenly of an infection in her early forties. Weeks later Jacquie was dead also. She was farewelled in a memorable tangi at Orimupiko Marae in the presence of her mountain, Taranaki, and buried in her whanau's beautiful coastal urupa at the foot of her mother, Mary's, grave. She is survived by her two children and many grand children and great grandchildren.

*Te mate i te wahine he pakaru tekere waka,
me e tukuna te kuru pounamu ngaro ai i te wao nui ā Tāne.*