

## **James K Baxter – an evolving memoir**

**Keir Volkerling**

### **Introduction 2019:**

In 1984, twelve years after Baxter's death, I received a letter from his official biographer, Frank McKay. He asked about my memories of Baxter in the time near to his death, and whether I had any letters or other documents. I didn't. He also asked when I had first seen Baxter's last poem, 'Ode to Auckland.' As I have a starring role in the poem, that was not surprising. I presume he was interested to know if I had seen it during its creation, and maybe had input into it. But I first saw it two months after Baxter's death.

Later recalling events from a busy crowded time, in which Baxter was only one of many players, was a challenge. However I enjoyed writing a memoir, and found there were many intact memories. With or without Frank McKay's interest, the exercise had its own value.

In 2011 a colleague who had read 'Ode to Auckland' asked me about Baxter, and I dug out the 27-year-old old memoir. My immediate temptation was to do some edits and rewriting, a temptation which I resisted. Instead I wrote some comments and provided explanations and context for events that were then over forty years old, now nearly fifty years past. I have drawn from those 2011 additions and included some of them in this version of the memoir. They appear in passages in italics.

I agreed to prepare this memoir for publication, and then Baxter was suddenly in the news. After his letters were published his rape in marriage became public knowledge, and this was followed by other revelations of sexual assault. So the third phase of my memoir writing is to rethink my memories of Baxter in his MeToo moment.

## **The Original Memoir: James Keir Baxter**

I was first introduced to Baxter in the winter of 1970. As must have been the norm for him his reputation preceded him. I had long been a reader of poetry, so knew him to an extent through his works. And frequently the poetry touched everyday life. The ‘A Small Ode on Mixed Flattering’ was written about Yoram Engel – a friend of mine who later threw himself into the Hudson River and died. Another friend had been inside with Te Whiu of ‘A Rope for Harry Fat.’

Baxter had been living not far from me when he was in Boyle Crescent, but though we had mutual friends we never met. Once he asked me for a match though at the time I didn’t know who he was. A non-smoker, I didn’t have one.

Apart from the large volume of written material by and about him, there was an enormous amount of anecdotal information. So I was meeting Baxter the writer, the folk-hero, the reformed drunk, the social commentator.

We met in a coffee bar called The Fat Landlady. It was a place that had been opened in 1969 with the hope of becoming a late night Auckland version of its European equivalent. It attempted to fill a gap between the expensive night club and the pie-cart. Little else existed then where, in casual clothing, one could feel at ease in the early hours of the morning. As a result the people of the Auckland streets flocked in. They were a mixed group. Shift workers, students, insomniacs, lots of junkies. It was a time of ‘the streets belong to the people’ – the late sixties and the politics of the street. So while, like many others, I used to go there after the pub or a party, there were other occasions to congregate there.

After the police ‘waded in’ across the road from the Intercontinental Hotel on the night of the Spiro Agnew demonstration most of us retreated to the refuge of Albert Park only to find it full of heavies in suits. For many people The Fat Landlady was the next place to go. So it had become all manner of things – a refuge, a meeting place; a bit seedy, dynamic and intense, totally uneconomic. Eventually the impecuniosity and exhaustion outweighed the advantages for the original partnership. Rather than abandon it entirely they offered, in February 1970, to lend it to me. That way it had a chance of remaining a going concern, and maybe even being saleable.

It was in the upper part of Symonds Street (No. 137 b), a rough and run down part of town. Two busy pubs at the top of Symonds Street/Khyber Pass had a largely Polynesian clientele who were little represented in ‘The Fats.’ I was then married to Ngahuia (Ngahuia Te Awekotuku). The first time I remember Kepa Pou coming in he saw Ngahuia, hesitated, then spoke to her in Māori. It was the beginning of what became a major change. From then on the proportion of brown faces increased, the

white ones decreased. It is a tale that needs fuller telling, but one comment that came some months later was that the place had become 'our marae.' When I asked in what way, the reply was that it was a meeting place, and a free and open one. There certainly was an internal truce that didn't operate outside the walls. Warring factions of Highway 61, Stormtroopers, and Hells Angels that battled in the streets rubbed shoulders neutrally in The Fats. Rival gang members, junkies, students, trainee rabbis, suburban couples, runaway juveniles and others sat together while around them dope was traded, poetry readings happened, a group of Marxist intellectuals met to talk, Milton played the blues, Stoney gave a non-stop two-hour speed rave, Mike had an epileptic fit on the floor, Marlene Dietrich sang on the juke box, cops raided, people scattered, people gathered, disputes brewed to fight proportions and were defused, and an aroha grew around the peoples' closeness to each other.

*Milton was Milton Hohaia, or Te Miringa Hohaia, of Parihaka. Stoney was Barry John O'Reilly later father of Alicia, whose murder remains unsolved.*

Then, as now, I wore my hair long.

When Baxter arrived the first thing he saw was me having my hair brushed. He remarked some time later that his lingering impression of the meeting was that scene, the caring and the warmth he saw in it.

That was the environment in which we met.

The introduction was effected by Neil Illingworth. He was then the cables editor of the *NZ Herald*, and a regular customer of The Fat Landlady. He had an impossible balance to achieve. On the one hand he was distrusted by the political radicals because he worked for the capitalist press. He was not popular with the conservative management of *The Herald* because of his lack of conformity. He had to answer to criticisms from both quarters while trying to best present the daily international news. He was one of Baxter's media contacts. Baxter fitted neatly into the contradictions surrounding Neil's situation. On the one hand he was of high literary standing and very newsworthy. On the other hand he looked like a grubby old tramp and consequently not welcome in the reporters' room. Neil felt it was important for Jim and I to meet. He was probably right.

*Neil Illingworth as a journalist had aspirations to be a non-journalistic writer. At one stage he had more current titles in publication than any other New Zealander, but they were all ghost-written or collaborative biographies in which his name was absent or with minimum exposure. While at Granny Herald he reported faithfully within the scope of the sources available. He, for instance, ensured that there was a half-page picture of numerous bodies floating in the Mekong after a My Lai-like raid.*

Living above The Fat Landlady since its opening was Herman Gladwin. Honest; irascible; living almost entirely on bananas, coffee and chips; imprisoned for political crimes in the late 1920s; sometime poet and painter; talker; long-time friend of Baxter's; long infamous in Auckland. I mentioned to Herman that Jim was likely to call in that evening and was greeted by a comment like "Well, that will lower the tone even further". But Herman was there to meet him.

*Herman had been in prison in Hawkes Bay during the 1931 earthquake. He told me of the terrifying effect of being incarcerated while massive blocks of stone shifted ominously around and above him. Herman, while living in Dilworth Terrace, devised what he called Lady Gwen floor polish. The recipe involved boiling a mixture including petrol over a gas stove. He flogged the product off to Catholic schools, having charmed the nuns. The first application cut through decades of scuffed heel marks and dropped detritus. The second dose started to eat through the floor boards. Lady Gwen had, as a result, only transitory success. But Dilworth Terrace, despite Lady Gwen's preparation, was not burnt down.*

On that occasion I felt like an observer, an extra, witnessing old friends meeting. And some sense of witnessing a slice of history. I have often had this type of feeling before and since. Some of this is my tendency to mythologise experience. But as accepted history is the mythology of the powerful, I make no apology. By being asked to respond for an "official biography" the two appear to be meeting. I feel concerned about this and would ask that anything resulting from what I've written that may be used be checked back with me.

There are three things that I remember from that evening.

First that Jim ascribed to me motives that consciously I've not had. Doubtless laudable ones, but not mine.

Second was Herman's distaste for the Boyle Crescent set-up and its inhabitants. At the same time Herman had been living in Dilworth Terrace – another older non-conformist among the group of younger people. But there were many differences. Certainly ones that Herman felt strongly. While the expression of those differences was then in a form that kept me laughing – Herman's indignation that any similarity could be seen to exist with Jim's serious and sonorous explanations – they were real and important differences. Whatever Jim was up to always had a definable social and altruistically justifiable goal. In most ways Herman is much more politically conscious and consciously political. But that sense of the messianic, of the guru figure, of the need for a consciously articulated social programme, of some type of quest for expiation that Jim had in himself, he automatically seemed to transfer to others whose actions or intentions coincided with his own in any way.

Thirdly I remember Herman stating that he considered himself the leader of the national movement to get Baxter back on the piss. Better, he said, a derelict drunken poet than a sanctimonious sober one. Especially one saturated with Catholicism. Jim replied “There are holes in my brain, and when I drink the alcohol seeps through and sends me mad. No, old friend, I won’t drink again.”

As I said before, I felt my presence to be incidental – the fly happy to be on the wall – at a meeting of old friends. Though Neil had specifically arranged for Jim and I to meet, I had no reason to believe that we would know each other further.

By August that year I had to close The Fat Landlady. I had the interest but it could not possibly pay. I did not see it as a financial failure. In fact it is one of the best ways I ever spent money. I got a job straight away as a labourer for a builder called Tantrum. No kidding. I was living in Grafton Road, which was almost as central a residence could be in Auckland. Much of The Fats followed me back there. Jim, and Jerusalem, soon found the trail.

The house in Grafton Road, while very old and beginning to disintegrate, remained in many ways a very attractive place. The large trees around it kept out some of the traffic noise and aided a general sense of tranquillity. Grafton Road had for a long time had a sense of community. This became more important as the motorway, hospital, and commercial buildings eroded the last Auckland inner city suburb.

In ‘Ode to Auckland’ Baxter took a degree of poetic licence. Nobody ever slept in the bathroom. Everywhere else maybe, but not there. While working for Tantrum I did work ten hours a day. But after May 1971 I started working for myself as a landscaping/bricklaying contractor. I then spent much less time on the job for much the same income. I don’t think it was ever enough to support the average “twenty-five people” of the ‘Ode.’

There were certainly many people who stayed there at times, or spent time there, through knowing Jim. People from Jerusalem, people Jim had known elsewhere, people he had met while hitching, people he had talked to once on a train, all and sundry were given the address. No doubt other addresses too, but few so accessible to central Auckland.

Jim stayed there himself also. So too did his children, Hilary and John, for longer periods. At one stage all three were there for a week or two. I can’t remember when the first time he stayed was, but he was there before and after the 1971 Waitangi protest. I think that was when he had been on a forty day fast (touch Messianic there). Ngahuia had been at Waitangi in 1969, and while the politics that are unavoidable now had not had the public attention then, we saw their first emergence. I think that it was after Waitangi 1971 that Jim and I first talked a lot. Rather he talked and I listened. First he read an

article he had been writing, for *The Herald* I think, then went on to fill me in on everything in his head at the time. Two hours was the usual before he had unloaded himself and could maybe start to listen.

“There is often a gramophone record playing in my head. I sometimes hear it play again and again. If you hear it replaying a tune you’ve heard before, tell me, I’ll lift off the needle.”

The eighteen months from August 1970 to February 1972 were intense, hedonistic, thronged with people, packed with pain and pleasure. More than anything they were dense with detail. To try now, more than twelve years later, to place things chronologically in the absence of any written record is not easy. Jim and I shared a verbal relationship. I don’t think so much as a note passed between us. He could come, he would talk. And talk, and talk, and talk. Then listen. Occasionally a message would filter through “Kia ora, kia kaha, kia manawanui.” Usually he would suddenly be there.

There were four things from that period that are pertinent.

One was the attitude of the two groups of people to Jim. The young devotees from Jerusalem had raised him to guru status. It was a mantle he didn’t avoid or throw off. However the older junkies spoke of the “good old days at Boyle before Baxter fucked it up.” Probably this is a bit unfair, or at least a bit inaccurate. I was not myself part of Boyle, can’t refer to the houses as number 4, number 6 and so on with familiarity. But I do know the change from the older junkies with real character to the middle class little rich kid temporary drop outs. I am not attempting to glorify or condemn drugs, but certainly for a while the people principally involved were very individual characters with lots of energy. When Baxter arrived on the scene they were no longer in the majority. So the change was coming and he coincided with it.

In ‘Ballad of the Junkies and the Fuzz’ it says:

They have taken Blind Bob away to the bin. To cut his brain.

Now he is for always a twelve-year child.

Bob Young, wearer of dark glasses, not in fact blind, did not have a lobotomy as is now proclaimed to the world. He sat in the kitchen in 56 Grafton Road and wrote;

Dear Mr Baxter

Goo, goo, goo, goo.

Blind Bob.

There was a resentment he shared with others.

*Blind Bob had interesting antecedents. His grandfather was a bookie and ran card gambling houses around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Auckland, when such activities were strictly illegal. His father ran sly grog shops during six o'clock closing (and one was in 54 Grafton Road before I was at 56). Bob was following his family tradition, but with contemporary adjustment, by being a junkie and a dealer in the sixties.*

Second, there was news of Jerusalem. Jim was prepared to sit and wait. Others were not. One was Kepa who brought the skills of a rural NZer. But there was often a gap between Jim's ideals and daily realities.

Thirdly, Jim was always asking me about my strategies and intentions. I didn't have any in the terms he asked, I was not setting myself up to 'help' anyone. I found myself in situations, which no doubt I led myself into in some way, then struggled through. One understanding that I reached then, almost as a counter-reaction to him, was that it is impossible to help anyone. Rather it is possible to help to create a supportive environment in which people can help themselves. And that is only effective if done by all those involved, not by someone for them. It was a relatively early stage in my understanding of concepts of community and community development. Today there is a wider wish among NZers to break away from the clearly bankrupt notions of nuclear family, suburban isolation, and traditional decision making. And while much understanding has been made in the last few years of what the problems are, and what might be starting points toward solutions, some basic confusions in attitudes persist. A lot of these are around notions of authority and leadership. Others about group versus individual responsibilities and deserts. The fact that at Jerusalem much of this was unclear is hardly surprising. Nor that Jim himself was unclear. Within Maori society Jim saw viable alternatives. However to try to embed them within Pakeha society was like transplanting a kauri in a paddock. Or worse, in a city street.

Fourthly, there was one conversation I remember because he remembered it. It came at the end of his standard two hour monologue.

"Keir, as another father of the tribe..."

"For Chrissake Jim, if there is any tribe, I'm sure as hell no father in it."

*While he tried to identify similarities between us, I was very aware of the differences. In a follow up letter to Frank McKay I added the following for inclusion in the memoir:*

*"There is a photograph in the Bill Oliver book which shows the older Jim sitting bare foot on some steps. His feet are those shaped for shoes. Barefoot though he became, the imprint remained. I have almost*

*never worn shoes; my toes spread out accordingly. It seems a symbol of the difference.”*

“But you know what I mean.”

And I did. Disagree maybe, but understand, yes. So objection overruled. He then told me how he and one of nga mokai (“a chick”) had fucked in an alley, with her arse propped up on a window ledge. (Not in a garage).

*The reference to “a garage” comes from a Baxter poem [‘Letter to Sam Hunt,’ 1968]:*

*I do recall one evening, drunk  
In Devonport on Dally plonk,  
Endangering my balls and marriage  
With someone’s darling in a garage.*

“So as another father of the tribe, do you think what I did was right? There are not many I can ask.”

I did understand the question and why he had asked me. If rightly or wrongly, deliberately or accidentally, you are regarded as filling the type of role Jim was describing then you are accorded a lot of power. For an older man there are a lot of moral dilemmas. On the one hand there is pandering to a groupie syndrome. On the other, a type of incest. But as a heterosexual male with sexual needs Jim had either to transgress this rather unclear code, or to seek sexual gratification outside of the group with whom he shared so much and with whom he spent most of his time.

“Jim. We are all human and have human needs. To be in the position you and I are doesn’t change that. What it does is to make it harder to know what to do about it. We spend so much time giving to so many it is hard to work out when and how to take. But at times you have to recharge your psychic batteries.” Then we went on to other things. I didn’t think much of it at the time; thought he probably hadn’t heard or cared about what I had said. To my surprise he quoted my comment back to me some months later as something that had been of value to him.

There are several things during that period that may seem anomalous. One is that despite the fact that “Keir” is a very unusual name, even in native Scotland, and that clearly we must have been named after Keir Hardie, we never spoke of it. [*The K in James K Baxter stands for Keir.*] Maybe it was taken for granted; maybe it would have been in later conversation, had he lived.

*The name Keir. To repeat a story I have often told, but I don't think ever written before:*

*I am fairly young – I'd guess about eight. I am with my mother at the Greenlane Hospital Ear Nose and Throat Department, having my ears probed. The patrician (and hyphenated) doctor asks me if I am named after Keir Hardie. "Yes" I reply, with evident pride. "Pity" he counters. He then handed me a lump of earwax, which I failed to retain, and it dropped to the floor. "Too slow" he said "you'll never get anywhere in life". Maybe he's right, at least when measured by earwax catching standards. My mother was outraged, and put in some sort of ineffectual complaint.*

*And literally days later, I am next door watching a housepainter working. "What's your name son?" "Keir" I reply. "Named after Keir Hardie?" So here we go again. Somewhat hesitantly I answer "yes". "Greatest man who ever lived". So, as I say, I had indelibly impressed on me from an early age a reverence for house painters and I reviled house surgeons.*

*Keir Hardie, Glaswegian, of the Independent Labour Party, was elected to Parliament by fellow Clydesiders. My mother's people. And unlike all others, from whatever background, he refused to attend in the customary tails and top hat, but went in his workman's clothes and his shipbuilder's cloth cap. More significantly, as the prospects of the First World War loomed, he tried to activate an "international" strike (really a European strike, but that was where it was happening) with the intent of halting armament manufacture and other war preparation. That he failed is evident, as patriotic fervour overtook pacifism. My namesake. And Jim's. Jim's father Archibald was stuck on a pile in no-man's land during World War One to punish his pacifism –*

*When I was only semen in a gland*

*Or less than that, my father hung*

*From a torture post at Mud Farm*

*Because he would not kill ...*

*I feared a death by cold in the cold groin*

*And plotted revolution. His black and swollen thumbs*

*Explained the brotherhood of man*

[‘Pig Island Letters, No. 8,’ 1963]

Also to me he was, and probably still is, just another person. There are ways in which I may well have been more important to him than he to me. I always found his Catholicism hard to handle. I don't think

he found my lack of it a difficulty.

In February 1972 I left Auckland and within a couple of months was living at Pollok, west of Auckland across the Manukau Harbour. I was occasionally in Auckland during that year and on at least one occasion saw Jim. But only briefly.

Apart from that brief, and not notable meeting (I think it must have been in the autumn) we had a more important final meeting. It must have been in September. Certainly it was not long before his death; it was after August and necessarily before Labour weekend. I was walking along Alfred St and saw Jim was sitting at a table outside the University coffee bar. He somehow looked physically different. He never looked a picture of health at the best of times, but this time he looked thinner, drawn. There were two statements that I heard from him then which are etched in my memory.

“Keir, I have become tired of listening to a man I know to be a fool, but I feel compelled to listen because that man is a priest”

“I have not reached the stage of doubting my religion, but I have reached the stage of realising that doubts may well exist”

I looked forward to a new and changed Baxter.

I returned to Pollok. Quarter of a mile along the road from where I lived was the Pollok shop where I collected my mail. There I later received a telegram to call Auckland. I called. Then I returned home, and then took off for Hiruharama. I can't remember who I rang in Auckland who told me about the 'Ode to Auckland,' though not then by that name, I know that I rang Neil Illingworth. It may have been him. I persuaded a neighbour to take me to Papakura where I caught the Herald bus to Taumaranui.

Walking south of Taumaranui, step by step I knew what I had to say when I arrived. When I arrived it was not the time. I found the kaupapa unfamiliar – the tūpāpaku in a whare mate outside the whareniui. My eyes were dry. The next day the Catholic rituals were foreign to me. And in view of our last conversation, so irrelevant. On the long haul up the hill to the grave Kepa and I were pall bearers. I don't know who the others were.

That night after kai I spoke. It was about how Matariki (the Pleiades) heralded a new year, so Hemi was a harbinger of a new age. I believe it still. The words and actions of Hemi were as irrelevant and as essential to the dawning of a new understanding as those dancing stars are to the turning of the seasons.

*I remember talking of Matariki back then in 1972. I only knew about it from reading, not from childhood. But I had to wait another 30 years or so before it became common currency.*

In 1973 I called into Jerusalem in early September. I did not stay overnight. The place looked like it could survive for some time. That is, the Baxter legacy could survive. Hiruharama itself remained unaffected.

In October that year Taura Eruera and I borrowed a car from somewhere and travelled south for the unveiling. Things were changed, but it still seemed possible that the “commune” could survive.

Nobody else I spoke to then acknowledged the changes I saw imminent in Baxter. Not until two years later, at least, when I spoke to Herman. He agreed with me completely. He also said he was trying to get Jim to be editor of *The People’s Voice* (in the tradition of Mason, no doubt).

*Ron Mason, noted NZ poet, was at once stage the editor of the polemical Peoples Voice, the NZ Communist Party publication.*

Only a year ago did I get from the library a copy of the collected poems. I knew that I featured in the last poem. It was only then that I discovered that the penultimate poem was dedicated to Herman. [‘The Tiredness of me and Herakles (a Letter to Herman Gladwin)]

I first saw ‘Ode to Auckland’ just before Xmas 1972. Dave Mitchell was insistent I should do so. I have always been somewhat embarrassed by it. I hope the above shows why.

## **Responses To The Memoir**

Frank McKay wrote to me rejecting any possibility that Baxter was likely to abandon his religion – “I have put that against what he said to others, especially in that last week ... I don’t think at all he was about to abandon Christianity.” He said he had not known who Herman was until he read my memoir, and had not got around to speaking to him while in Auckland. It is very possible that the “others” Jim spoke to and Frank heard from were not open to hearing there was a change coming. Frank was a former Catholic priest, and was not easily going to let St James slip from sight of canonisation.

## A Letter from Brian Bell

I was in Wellington and I bumped into Brian Bell in Manners Street, and we immediately repaired to a pub (my shout, necessarily). Brian had been famed and infamous about Wellington for years. He was (at least reputed) to have usually inhabited outdoor wash-houses, decamping in the night when either sprung or having outstayed his welcome. I remember, after a number of ales, writing to various people (of whom I only remember Sam Hunt as recipient). Brian kept envelopes and stamps in his pocket, because as a journalist and a pisshead he could meet a deadline from the bar if he had the stationery and the postage. And he told me a Bell story:

He claimed to have woken that morning in a house in which he was squatting (pre-demolition). As was possible in Wellington, the seedy and the affluent then could be adjacent. Bell saw an opulent gentlemen get into his opulent car, and he accosted him with “could you spare a writer something for breakfast”. “Neither a borrower or a lender be”, replied the driver, “William Shakespeare”. And he drove off, but not very far – only to a nearby red traffic light. Bell, puffing up the footpath, caught up with him, looked in the window, and said “Cunt, DH Lawrence”.

Which was a great story, which produced in me the reaction he expected. “So now you will go and tell everyone else,” he said. And I did. And I have ever since. And so the legend grows.

He asked me for a copy of the memoir, which I later sent. In a letter in reply he said:

“Yes, it is good; you did well there, this is precisely the type of memory of Jim that the ideological twisted farts of Catholicism would like to obliterate or swamp in supercilious academic footnotes of patronisation. It was Baxter’s own fault really. He was such a schizoid pander who loved intellectual conundrums, kaleidoscopes, mystification, obtustification (sic), and conundrums .... somewhere along the line made him loth to give up 12<sup>th</sup> century religious lumber.”

### **Third Thoughts – The 2019 Memoir**

When I became aware of the revelations in the published letters of rape within marriage, and more than that, bragging and justifying it, I questioned how well I knew Baxter. When I looked again at the memoir, the time he asked me about having sex with “the mokai,” “the chick,” stands out. I did then identify the power difference and its consequences. But at the time of the conversation, and of the original memoir, I did not think he was using his power to coerce or force sex within the commune. I was not at Jerusalem, and only saw Baxter occasionally, so I was not in a position to see all that was happening. And I did not hear any reports of his transgressions.

But nor did I ever revere him as a guru or an absolute font of wisdom. Inevitably there was some part of me flattered that a significant literary figure considered me his friend. In the memoir I definitely do not put him on a pedestal. Brian Bell described what I wrote as “truthful and forthright” and “steely-minded scepticism”. But I do need to question how I missed such a major flaw in the man.

I realise only now that while Baxter interpreted what I was doing in terms of his own self, looking again at the memoir I realise I was mirroring that process. “For an older man there are a lot of moral dilemmas.” Yes, for myself there were. But Baxter was travelling with a different moral compass, not mine.

I do not and cannot know details about the sex with “the mokai”. Between consent and rape there is a continuum. Anything other than mutual consent for sex is unacceptable, but there is a spectrum from consent, to persuasion, to coercion, to intimidation through to physical force. It was the sixties / seventies where sex was freely indulged. And so it is possible that this was a fully consensual occasion. Or it could have just as easily been an expectation of compliance, similar to his marital expectations, a type of droit de seigneur, or in his case droit de guru. Or it could have been worse. We now all know how possible that is.

There are women who have said to me of Baxter, that as women they don’t hold him in high regard. But I do not know if this was from personal preference, reaction to his sexual persona, from having to rebut sexual advances, or because of worse encounters.

I did not completely avoid those issues in the memoir, but I did not meet them head on. If he had been regularly expecting or demanding sex from various mokai / chicks I could have known. But as a male of the species, maybe not.

Since the public revelations I asked a woman friend, who was there back then, what she could tell me of this aspect of the real JKB in the years she knew him? She said back in those days she was not too selective about sex partners, but Baxter had not made any sexual advances to her. But she does know of other women who had been subject to pressure from him, and added that she knows of much more and much worse which could be revealed.

So was I naïve? Should I have known more? Should I have done more? The answer to all of those questions is, quite probably. Although it was a different time, and different norms applied, if I had known then I would have confronted him. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

In writing this current version of the memoir I look over the names I use for JKB. In most of the original memoir he is Jim. Twice he is Hemi (at Jerusalem), but I never used that name with him. Somehow did not fit him properly. Then he was “Jim”. But in all my current writing he is “Baxter”. It is as though after the revelations I cannot use the friendly “Jim”. If he ever was a friend, he cannot any longer be one.

His image before the publishing of the letters was of a giant of New Zealand letters. Sadly the image that now dominates is of his ineffective sexual advances with his flaccid penis.

Of course his poetry remains, and while there is an inevitable devaluing, his opus had and still has a major role in the country’s literature.

And as an afterthought, the wider public only now know, getting on for fifty years after his death, of the content of his letters, and details of his transgressions. How many others who have been held in regard did not record their misdeeds and send them on to others, or whose letters are lost and gone, also deserve second thoughts? Who knows

