

**Hunt's Baxter**

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I didn't know  
Then how short life is – how few  
The ones who really touch us

(‘Words to Lay a Strong Ghost’, 1966)

It is a little over 83 years since James Keir Baxter was born. Today, he is one of Aotearoa's more familiar cultural personages (along with such figures as Janet Frame and Colin McCahon) and one of our few widely recognised poets, represented in the majority of twentieth century New Zealand verse anthologies and in many international English-language equivalents. Indeed, Baxter has in this country assumed the status of *icon* (with all the ambiguity that this implies). Had he not died in 1972, Baxter would no doubt have something to say about his present fame – he was an astute and prolific commentator, and an uncommonly self-conscious one. As it is, we-the-living are steadily turning out Baxter-based publications, *James K. Baxter: Poems* (Auckland University Press, 2009), selected and introduced by Sam Hunt, being just one recent example.

I first learned of Hunt's selection of Baxter when visiting a favourite Auckland bookshop. The handsome little publication was displayed in precisely the same spot as had been occupied some months before by another attractive hardback, Hunt's own *Doubtless: New & Selected Poems* (Craig Potton, 2008). This latter I had purchased without hesitation. Despite wide popularity and saleability, Hunt's poetry has of late been rather hard to get hold of. The demise of Hazard Press of Christchurch has effectively rendered Hunt's *Making Tracks: A Selected 50 Poems* (1991) out of print, and second hand copies of his predominantly paperback collections are scarce, especially in good condition. *Doubtless* makes a decent quantity and range of Hunt's work readily available in an enduring form. The book pays tribute to a dedicated and influential artist, as well as illustrating the quality and liveliness of New Zealand's contemporary publishing scene. These comments apply in essence to *James K. Baxter: Poems* also.

Initially, I had reservations about Hunt's selection of Baxter's poetry – not because of the concept (the practice of one poet selecting another is well established, and Hunt is in principle an ideal editor, being acquainted with Baxter and successful in his own right), but because it seemed to me that there was no shortage of material about. In actual fact, while there are more than twenty volumes of verse to Baxter's name (including several selections), only two besides Hunt's publication remain in print, *Collected Poems of James K. Baxter* (Oxford University Press, 2003), edited by John Weir, and *New Selected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 2001), edited by Paul Millar. (I exclude two children's books currently in print.) Both are fine publications; but size and cost are obvious drawbacks. Weir's *Collected* is an unwieldy hardback, running to nearly 700 pages and retailing for upwards of \$115. Millar's paperback *Selected* is still sizeable at around 300 pages, and pricey at \$65. *James K. Baxter: Poems*, on the other hand, is a lightweight and small scale hardback of 105 pages, with a retail price of just \$30. While the Weir and Millar editions are eminently well suited to the student or serious Baxter follower, the newcomer or more casual reader will prefer Hunt's affordable, accessible and portable selection.

In format and function, *James K. Baxter: Poems* is appreciably similar to an earlier volume, *The Essential Baxter* (Oxford University Press, 1993, now out of print), selected and introduced by John Weir. Both books provide a sample of Baxter's work (the Weir consisting of prose and verse, much of which is excerpted) and serve to invite further investigation. Such publications are not only acceptable but important. They are the antipodean cousins of pocket editions of Keats or Burns, being directed at the people whom most poets wish to reach.

A celebrated travelling bard, Hunt has been reciting verses by Baxter for many years, presenting them to new audiences around New Zealand ('in pubs, theatres, festivals, schools and the like', as Hunt notes in his introduction). The publication of *James K. Baxter: Poems*, then, represents the latest step in an ongoing Hunt project of popularising Baxter's verse, a project that has at its heart performance. Baxter's own recitals, lectures and rants are renowned, and recordings leave no doubt that he was a powerful speaker. Hunt speculates that, had he lived longer, Baxter might have tended towards touring: 'I can well imagine him taking poetry to the people that way.' Such conjectures are naturally impossible to verify. An increased emphasis on oral communication is certainly plausible (indeed, Baxter set out on a speaking tour of schools north of Auckland less than a month before his death), although it is probably misguided to envision Baxter as a troubadour. Publication, with its potential for commercialism and elitism, proved increasingly objectionable to Baxter as his aspirations to poverty and a life 'without money or books' (McKay 237) strengthened and his preoccupation with the margins and socially marginalised deepened. Words, however, remained essential to Baxter – he was working on poems until the end (McKay

285-86). That Baxter should continue to employ the democratic spoken word seems to me a matter of course, though he might never have developed Hunt's brand of showmanship.

*James K. Baxter: Poems* – expressly based on material that Hunt has repeatedly performed (or 'road tested') reflects his belief in the importance of poetry off the page. In a parenthetical aside Hunt notes: 'In my opinion if poems don't work read out aloud then they're not poems that are working poems.' Accordingly, most of the verses that Hunt has chosen are sonically effective and apt to his dramatic mode of delivery. They showcase Baxter's facility for rhythm, and many (as with Hunt's own poems) only achieve their true force when spoken. The often-anthologised 'Lament for Barney Flanagan' (1953) exemplifies this. Lines such as 'The sky was bright as a new milk token' and 'The priest came running but the priest came late / For Barney was banging at the Pearly Gate' appear rather flat on the page. Read aloud, however, their jaunty rhythm and paradoxical pathos become apparent.

An especially aurally pleasing poem included in Hunt's selection is 'A Rope for Harry Fat' (1956), with its careful rhyme and metre:

Oh some have killed in angry love  
And some have killed in hate,  
And some have killed in foreign lands  
To serve the business State.  
The hangman's hands are abstract hands  
Though sudden death they bring –  
'The hangman keeps our country pure,'  
Says Harry Fat the King.

[...]

Te Whiu was too young to vote,  
The prison records show.  
Some thought he was too young to hang;  
Legality said, *No*.  
Who knows what fear the raupo hides  
Or where the wild duck flies?  
'A trapdoor and a rope is best,'  
Says Harry Fat the wise.

Devices such as repetition ('some have killed in', 'too young'), juxtaposition ('love' and 'hate'), alliteration and assonance ('hangman's hands are abstract hands') are put to excellent use. The poem, based on the actual hanging of Eddie Te Whiu in 1955 (McKay 150), is more compelling for its immaculate construction which serves to burlesque the false wisdom of 'Harry Fat', a figure for the system of capital punishment effectively in place in New Zealand until 1957. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's 'Ballad of Reading Gaol' (1897) in which beautiful writing is employed to expose a culture of serious ugliness.

Well crafted, situated locally, moralistic and affecting, 'A Rope for Harry Fat' bears the hallmarks of much of Baxter's finest verse. Hunt explains that his aim was to choose quality poems, particularly poems that Baxter himself would have considered 'top-drawer' (this expression apparently used by Baxter in relation to his more successful and preferred work). This intention is admirable if somewhat difficult to test. Baxter's last selection of his own poetry, *The Rock Woman*, was brought out by Oxford University Press in 1969, therefore predating work from his crucial final years. Even so, the volume may be used to identify some material valued by Baxter. It features various verses from his first years of publication, including 'Poem in the Matukituki Valley' (1949), 'Wild Bees' (1941-49) and 'The Bay' (1946). Such poems display the aptitude for evocative description that helped to catapult Baxter to early fame:

And by the bay itself were cliffs with carved names  
And a hut on the shore beside the Maori ovens.  
We raced boats from the banks of the pumice creek  
Or swam in those autumnal shallows  
Growing cold in amber water, riding the logs  
Upstream, and waiting for the taniwha.

('The Bay')

It seems somewhat unusual that Hunt should include just one poem written prior to 1950, the brief 'High Country Weather' (1945), which Baxter chose to leave out of *The Rock Woman*:

Alone we are born  
And die alone;  
Yet see the red-gold cirrus  
Over snow-mountain shine.

Upon the upland road  
Ride easy stranger:

Surrender to the sky  
Your heart of anger.

'High Country Weather' always puts me in mind of Allen Curnow's similarly slight 'Wild Iron' (1941). Both poems are much anthologised, being romantic and easy to digest; but neither does justice to the abilities of its author.

More surprising is the absence from *James K. Baxter: Poems* of all of the celebrated 'Jerusalem Sonnets' (1969-70), which describe so potently Baxter's earlier experiences at Hiruharama and his attitudes to them. Baxter's ultimate agreement to the publication of the poems confirms their importance to him. (He was initially reluctant: 'I will not print them; but in time they could be, of course' McKay 250). In his introduction, however, Hunt explains that none of the sonnets satisfies his own 'criterion for picking a good poem', namely that it be memorable to him. His inclination towards work that appeals to the ear provides another (and demonstrably related) justification: 'Some of them are excellent poems, perhaps not reading-out-loud poems'. This suggestion by Hunt is somewhat weak. Several of the poems are hymn-like, suited perfectly to Baxter's sermonic delivery if not to Hunt's style. 'Sonnet 38' provides an example:

'I am dying now because I do not die' –  
The song of the thief who hangs upon the tree;

'The house where I was born had seven windows  
But its door is closed to me;

Whether I robbed or not I have forgotten,  
My death has taken hold of me;

There was a woman once who gave me a cup of wine  
And her eyes were full of mercy;

There is not even judgement any more  
In the place where I have to be;

I cannot turn my head to find out  
Who hangs beside me on the tree;

Let the woman who is standing down below  
Say a prayer for him and me.'

Hunt goes on to say that he finds the sonnets 'more egotistical', a reasonable enough remark given the intense intimacy of the poems (remarkable even for Baxter, who was never shy about making himself the subject of his work). More interesting is Hunt's suggestion (albeit rather vague) that the sonnets are transitional, that in them Baxter was 'still feeling his way' and had not yet 'moved back into his mystical self'. Hunt's preference is apparently for poems with a more fully realised philosophical base, poems that 'embody the ultimate dream', as he puts it.

In place of the 'Jerusalem Sonnets' Hunt offers a number of later Baxter poems that are more to his taste, including two expressly addressed to him, 'Letter to Sam Hunt' (written pre-Jerusalem, 1968) and 'Kumara Poem' (written at Jerusalem, 1971). The temptation to decry Hunt's ego is put to bed by an excellent display of Baxter's bawdiness and acidity:

Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt, Sam Hunt,  
The housewife with her oyster cunt  
Has pissed upon what might have been  
Lively, original and green,  
The old pohutukawa tree  
With hairy ballocks on its knee.

('Letter to Sam Hunt')

It is followed by a display of Baxter's religiosity, interest in Maoritanga, and sensitivity to the plights of others:

'Kua mate Te Atua' –  
the great ghost has gone  
with his brandy and canticles;  
down here, down low, it is to  
eat the bread a girl  
baked for herself and us  
with sixty scars on her arms

('Kumara Poem')

In addition to these poems, Hunt includes the illuminating 'Jerusalem Blues 2' (1971) with its plain but potent descriptions and its tidy octets (betraying Baxter's continuing attention to form):

you can hear the children yelling  
on the dirt road of the pa –  
fair enough – now Peter,  
not long out of the bin,  
an eagle who stares at the sun,  
has come to sit beside me –  
'You're writing a poem, Hemi?  
Well, it's about time' –

I leave him to talk to the driver  
and head back for a shit –  
no angel with a scroll,  
no news from thunder mountain,  
no journey at all to make,  
just a knife to cut open  
the loaf of Maori bread  
that goes to feed my gut.

Remembering that selections (and this one extends to just 50 poems) are necessarily exclusive and subjective to some extent, Hunt must ultimately be commended for his efforts. Sensibly, the poems are presented in rough chronological order, and most show a date of composition. Details of first publication and collection are unfortunately not provided. Time-wise, there is a roughly even spread of material, at least from 1956 on. If the occasional choice is disappointing ('Hokitika Bill' is skilful but dull), there are many delights. With the inclusion of lesser-known gems such as 'For Kevin Ireland' (1957) and 'Sings Clarry' (1956), Hunt succeeds in his aim of presenting some quality Baxter poems that have 'slipped under the radar':

Hagley Park on a Sunday  
Or Auckland's One Tree Hill,  
I have worn my boots out walking  
And I still will,  
*sings Clarry.*

[...]

They wouldn't give it to me  
Though she left it in her will,  
But my mother's kauri breadboard

Belongs to me still,  
sings Clarry.

[...]

‘I feel sorry for him,’  
Flossie the barman said.  
‘What use is a breadboard  
If you haven’t any bread?’

‘Sings Clarry’ first appeared in *The Iron Breadboard: Studies in New Zealand Literature*, a seldom-seen Baxter collection published by Denis Glover at the Mermaid Press in Wellington in 1957. The book consists of parodies of various New Zealand poets (including Allen Curnow, A.R.D. Fairburn, Louis Johnson, Alistair Campbell and M.K. Joseph), with all verses referencing the eponymous breadboard. ‘Sings Clarry’ is a takeoff (or rather a piss-take) of Glover’s ‘Sings Harry’ poems. In it, Baxter closely mimics Glover’s style, his stilted rhythms, his use of direct demotic language (‘worn my boots out’), and his preference for working class settings and down-and-out heroes.

Hunt points to Baxter’s uncanny knack for imitation in his introduction to *James K. Baxter: Poems*: ‘Baxter of course has this great chameleon ability, he could take on someone else’s style, which he did lots of times.’ Such casual but instructive observations are scattered throughout Hunt’s essay (allusions are made to Baxter’s influence on the New Zealand Catholic community, his tendency to be provocative and his huge productivity). Detailed analysis of Baxter’s work is avoided. Hunt instead concentrates on sketching out a history of his experience of Baxter and his poetry. Particularly interesting is Hunt’s report of a comment made to him regarding Baxter’s anti-war poem ‘The Gunner’s Lament’ (1965): ‘Keith Holyoake’s son once said to me, “Dad always believed what he did was right in Vietnam, but he was very hurt by that Baxter poem.”’

Hunt’s stories are often rambling and inconsequential but they are pleasant to read. Hunt is at ease with anecdote and is a natural raconteur. His writing is sincere and intimate, exuding a great admiration and fondness for Baxter, whom he recognises as a fellow misfit with a lyric gift: ‘Baxter runs through my head. Baxter does a hell of a lot more – he’s a regular wind running through my head! He is one of my major constellations.’ I am certain that *James K. Baxter: Poems* will direct a few more gazes skyward.

Note:

Dates accompanying poems by James K. Baxter are approximate dates of composition as given in *James K. Baxter: Poems and Collected Poems of James K. Baxter*.

### **Works Consulted**

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