

EARTHQUAKE COUNTRY: READING HUBERT WITHEFORD'S 'BARBAROSSA'

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The disasters that have struck Christchurch in September 2010 and February 2011 have prompted memories and discussions of the Hawke's Bay earthquake of February the 3rd 1931, which killed more than two hundred and fifty people and leveled the towns of Napier and Hastings. A number of histories of the quake of 1931 have been written over the decades, but literature offers us different, and perhaps differently useful, ways to consider the great quake of 1931. One of the strangest and most powerful literary responses to the disaster came from Hubert Witheford, a man who seldom figures as more than a footnote in histories of New Zealand culture.

Born in 1921, a year before Hone Tuwhare and Kendrick Smithyman, Witheford founded and ran a little magazine called *Arachne*, which attempted to disturb the conventions of postwar New Zealand society by publishing translations and discussions of Camus, Ezra Pound, and other avant-garde European writers and thinkers, along with the work of a circle of young Wellington writers. *Arachne* published three handsome issues between January 1950 and December 1951. Witheford contributed a pioneering discussion of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* to the journal's first issue, which also featured a translation of 'The Actor', a passage from Camus' book-length essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. *Arachne's* editor had strong views on politics as well as literature, and these need to be understood if his response to the Hawke's Bay quake is to be appreciated.

Most Kiwi intellectuals of Witheford's generation felt a tension between a commitment to the left and a commitment to what we might call high culture. On the one hand, intellectuals benefited from the expansion of the state that occurred under the first Labour government, an expansion which was more or less accepted by subsequent governments. Labour had established a range of institutions - a national public radio network, a real national library, a symphony orchestra, a pension for writers, and so on - which made the lives of intellectuals easier. Labour had also encouraged, as part of events like the 1940 National Centennial, the notion of a distinctive New Zealand identity that was so dear to many mid-century Kiwi intellectuals. (v. Barrowman pp. 1-8)

Because of their very success, though, Labour and its allies on the left often seemed complicit in the insularity and philistinism of mainstream New Zealand society. Postwar New Zealand, with its new suburbs of identikit homes, its worship of the trinity of 'rugby, racing, and beer', its moral conservatism and damaging taboos about sex, and its suspicion of 'snobbish' pursuits like literature, music, and painting, seemed like an unwelcoming place for many intellectuals, and inspired denunciations such as Bill Pearson's well-known 1952 essay 'Fretful Sleepers' (Pearson, pp. 1-33) and James K Baxter's sequence of poems *Pig Island Letters* in the 1960s.

Hubert Witheford seems to have been unusually free of conflicted feelings towards Labour and its allies, and towards the welfare state society the left had helped create. In writings for *Arachne* and in a number of other texts he produced in the '50s, he uses the most vituperative language and imagery available to condemn the 'humanitarian ethic' he identifies with the left, and with modern New Zealand and Western society in general. (We can consider, as examples, the essays 'Background to a Magazine', which appeared in *Arachne's* second issue in February 1951, and 'The Evaporation of Social Democracy', which appeared in *Arachne's* third and final issue in December 1951.)

In 'Background to a Magazine' Witheford, who seems to have suffered from the same intense nostalgia for an idealised pre-industrial society as writers like T.S. Eliot and Evelyn Waugh, says

'humanitarianism', with its materialism, its rationalism, its faith in the possibility of historical progress, and its belief in action by the state to improve the world, is a poor substitute for the 'fiery core' of old-fashioned, irrational religion.

Witheford's rejection of the left-wing politics which held a certain attraction for many other New Zealand writers was not necessarily complemented by some sort of simple identification with mainstream right-wing politics on his part. In 'The Evaporation of Social Democracy' he condemns the statism of both social democrats and Marxists, and claims that New Zealanders were rejecting the 'top-heavy structure' the first Labour government had created when they voted National into office in November 1949, yet nonetheless says he would support a 'decentralised' leftism that somehow acted without reference to either the state or the trade union movement. In an interview conducted with Lauris Edmond in the early '80s, Witheford states that he 'found himself in a Right Wing stance at the time of the Berlin crisis and Cuba', but that 'this didn't survive the end of the American dream and the assassination of the Kennedys' (Witheford, 1982: 309). It seems likely that Witheford often considered the spirituality he found in writers like Ouspensky and Gurdijeff as an alternative to the doctrines of either left-wing or right-wing politics.

Humanitarianism necessitates, Witheford claimed in one of his articles for *Arachne*, a 'battle' for 'national booty' between 'well-fed pressure groups' (Witheford, 1951a: p. 22). Because humanitarianism leads to conflict, and ultimately to social disintegration, Witheford believes it is complicit in the appalling violence of the twentieth century. In a sentence which must have raised eyebrows in 1950s New Zealand, Witheford confessed to *Arachne's* readers that he could not look at the 'trim state housing settlements' of his country without remembering 'that they imply the atomic bomb' (ibid.).

Witheford's attacks on the various manifestations of the creed of humanitarianism could be witty, as well as vituperative. In his book *Don't Let it Get You: memories and documents*, John O'Shea recalls a hoax that he and Witheford perpetrated on left-wing film fans in the late 1940s. Irritated

by the popularity of movies which trumpeted the alleged achievements of the Soviet Union and the 'people's democracies' established in Eastern Europe after World War Two, O'Shea and Witheford published a spoof article called 'The Film in Albania' in the bulletin of the Wellington Film Society. Parodying the language of Stalinist culture-bureaucrats, the two men described a series of non-existent works by a non-existent uber-proletarian Albanian director, as well as the tumultuous welcome one of these movies had supposedly received: 'There are many delightful touches of earthy humour in this film. The little audience of workers with whom I saw it roared for minutes on end at the scenes in which the old man's little grandson trips up the landlords' agent so that he falls, head downwards, into the village latrine...' (O'Shea and Witheford). The authors of 'The Film in Albania' were pleased when they learned that their piece had been piously reprinted in several prestigious overseas film journals.

Witheford's quest for the 'fiery core' of religious belief led him in some odd directions. O'Shea recalls that his old friend liked to go 'grasshopping among gurus' by reading works by P.D. Ouspensky and George Gurdijeff, Russian 'spiritual scientists' who rejected empirical inquiry and discourse in favour of intuitions, trances, and visions, and who built up private cosmologies composed of numerous angels, demons, and astral beings. O'Shea thinks that Witheford's fascination with the work of Ouspensky and Gurdijeff was part of a deliberate 'flight from reason' on his part (O'Shea, 1999: 150-151).

Witheford settled permanently in Britain after 1956, getting a job in the civil service and losing some of his connections to the New Zealand literary scene. He had produced a couple of slim, beautifully-printed, poorly-reviewed books of poetry before leaving his homeland, and he continued to write the occasional poem after resettling. To his chagrin, though, he found that many of these short, usually splenetic pieces relied for their subject matter on memories of the dreary country he had left behind.

One of Witheford's backward-looking poems was 'Barbarossa', which was published in his 1967 book *A Native, Perhaps Beautiful*:

Barbarossa

Addiction to the exceptional event –

That flaw

In something like *My Childhood Days in X*,

And fault-line - as from the Aleutians

Down the Pacific to where I was when

It opened wide one day when I was ten.

The town-hall whistle blows. It's five

To twelve. Now homewards, slow,

Turning a legend like a stone, sea-worn,

Red-streaked. The bearded Emperor in the German cave

Sits in his armour; when will he wake and go

Clanking into the light to lead his hordes?

The gutters heave.

 Upon the rumbling ground

I balance. I sit down.

A stop to stories of the death of kings.

I watch the telegraph

Poles. A great hand plucks the strings.

Upon the other coast Napier, too, sways
Most irrevocably: flames. Looters are shot
By landing parties near the gutted shops.
Half a hill
Split on the coast-road; squashed in their ancient Fords
The burghers sit there still. (Witheford, 1967: 8)

'Barbarossa' is not, on the face of it, a particularly difficult poem. The poet remembers how as a ten year-old he was walking home, pondering the legend of the medieval German ruler Frederick Barbarossa, when he felt the shock waves from the faraway Hawkes Bay earthquake. After recalling the 'heaving gutters' and trembling telegraph wires that the quake caused in Wellington, Witheford turns his attention to the Hawkes Bay, where, in Napier alone, the disaster claimed more than one hundred and sixty lives.

Witheford's account of the 1931 earthquake contains a number of allusions to the legend which gathered around Barbarossa in the centuries after the monarch's death in 1190. Remembering Barbarossa's abilities as both a fighter and a thinker and his success in uniting several German fiefdoms into the Holy Roman Empire, German nationalists spread the story that the great leader did not really die, but instead retired to a cave in the Kyffhauser hills of Thuringia, deep in the 'green heart' of Germany, to sleep. When the time was right, the legend-mongers claimed, the emperor would wake, emerge from his cave, and lead an army against the enemies of Germans. In the nineteenth century Bismarck used Barbarossa as a symbol of the newly-united German nation, raising an enormously ugly monument to the emperor in the Kyffhausers. In 1941 Hitler named his invasion of the Soviet Union Operation Barbarossa.

When he writes of a 'great hand' plucking 'the strings' of telegraph poles, Witheford raises the possibility that the 'fault line opening' across the Pacific might symbolise the stirring of Barbarossa. When he imagines the 'burghers' of Napier 'squashed in their ancient Fords' under half a hillside, the poet invites a comparison between the armour-clad emperor in his cave and these armour-clad victims of the 1931 quake.

At about the same time that Witheford was writing 'Barbarossa', his old and close friend Peter Munz was working on the book that would be published in 1969 under the title *Frederick Barbarossa: a Study in Medieval Politics*. Munz was a German-Jewish historian and philosopher who escaped from Nazi Europe to New Zealand, where he built a distinguished career at Victoria University; he seems to have embodied, for Witheford and for a number of his other friends, the sophisticated European intellectual and cultural tradition that mid-century New Zealand was so lacking. As we shall soon see, Witheford's friendship with Munz ensured that he was very familiar with the story of Barbarossa.

When C.K. Stead reviewed *A Native, Perhaps Beautiful* for *Landfall* in 1968, he quoted 'Barbarossa' in full, and discussed it in some detail. Stead included his review of Witheford in his 1982 collection *In the Glass Case: essays on New Zealand Literature*, and used it again in his 2002 book *Kin of Place: essays on 20 New Zealand writers*. After noting the apparent allusions to Barbarossa in Witheford's poem, Stead asks how many of them are 'deliberate', and wonders whether their motivation and significance might possibly be grasped (Stead, 1981: 233). Stead decides that we cannot say with confidence that the allusions are deliberate, and he warns against trying too hard to interpret them, claiming that: 'though...a "full" reading of the poem will notice these parallels, one cannot insist that a "correct" reading will make just so much, or just so little, of them. The strength of the poem is the degree to which it is governed by an actual event...' (ibid).

I want to query Stead's claim that the details of 'Barbarossa' are 'governed' – that is, necessitated and justified - by the 'actual event' of February the 3rd 1931, and that attempts to give them some wider import are thereby misguided. Stead appears unaware that Witheford's poem is in certain places quite inconsistent with the facts of the 1931 earthquake. Witheford writes, for instance, about 'looters' being shot by 'landing parties near the gutted shops' of Napier. A navy sloop named the *HMS Veronica* was anchored in Napier harbour when the earthquake struck the city, and quickly sent ashore a party of crew to help clear rubble and search for survivors. The landing party from the *Veronica* did not, however, encounter, let alone shoot, any looters in the ruins of Napier. Witheford has invented this detail of his poem. Witheford also appears to have invented his poem's buried Ford-drivers. (For an account of the disaster and its aftermath, see Matthew Wright's *Quake: Hawke's Bay 1931*, Reed, Auckland, 2001. Wright's chapter 'Thank God for the Navy!' deals with the role of the *Veronica* and other vessels in the quake's aftermath.)

If the details of 'Barbarossa' aren't dictated by the simple facts of what happened on February the 3rd 1931, as C.K. Stead claims, how can we explain them? What principle underlies Witheford's selections and inventions? I want to answer these questions by suggesting that Frederick Barbarossa represented, to Witheford, the origins of a certain ideology, and that, consciously or unconsciously, Witheford's poem uses Barbarossa and the 1931 quake to symbolise the baleful consequences that he thought this ideology had produced in the twentieth century.

As we have seen, Witheford believed that modern societies, with their rationalism, their belief in progress, and - sometimes - their state-sponsored 'humanitarianism', are inferior to older societies in which the 'fiery core of religion' shaped beliefs and behaviour. Witheford argued that the apparently enlightened features of modern societies - the state housing programme of New Zealand, for example - were not opposed to, but actually obscurely dependent upon, uglier features of the modern world like the nuclear bomb. Witheford attempted to replace modern ways of thinking with a 'flight from reason' that led him toward religion in general, and toward the mystical systems of Guridijeff and Ouspensky in particular. The December 1950 issue of *Landfall* featured a piece called 'Questionnaire: a Choice of Books', which asked a series of

Kiwi writers about which books they'd most enjoyed in the last twelve months. Witheford's list of favourites was topped by Ouspensky's tome *A New Model of the Universe*, and also included Ananda K Coomaraswamy's *Hinduism and Buddhism* and texts by the Jewish religious thinker Martin Buber and the Catholic theologian J.H. Newman (Witheford, 1950, p. 353)

Witheford's views did not always meet with approval, even amongst his friends. In a memoir called 'Ourselves When Young', John O'Shea recalled how Witheford would treat a reluctant Peter Munz to lectures about the strange doctrines of his Russian 'gurus'. Munz, who had learned a distrust for metaphysical speculation from his famous teachers Wittgenstein and Popper, would refuse to play Witheford's game: 'When Hubert...ventured into the realms of the mystical teachers...Peter would nod his head sagely and silently. After a decent pause, he would slowly begin discussing the medieval procedures of customs administration, or how Frederick Barbarossa threaded his way between the rivalries of the Welfen and Hohenstaufen families' (Fairburn and Oliver, p. 46).

Why would Munz counterpose Frederick Babrarossa to Witheford's gurus, as a topic for discussion? It is not only that Barbarossa, as a real, documented historical figure, could be the subject of a reasonably orderly, down-to-earth discussion, in a way that the demons and astral beings posited by Guridijeff and Ouspensky could not be. Despite or because of the fact that he lived in an age of superstition and chaos, Barbarossa represented, for Munz, a model of the practical and rational, if not necessarily likeable, political leader. Munz's biography of the emperor was intended to dispose of the myths that had enveloped him, and to reveal him, not as some sort of chthonic nationalist, but as, in the words of Paul Hoffman, an 'astute and flexible politician' (Hoffman, p. 55).

I want to suggest that, for Witheford, Munz's Barbarossa was a leader who prefigured, in his calculative thinking as well as his enthusiasm for extending state power, key political actors of the modern world. Munz wanted to absolve Barbarossa of any mystical connection with the ideologies of Bismarck and Hitler; for a man with Witheford's unusual presuppositions, though,

Munz's interpretation of Barbarossa may actually have *demonstrated* that the emperor was a precursor to these and other modern leaders.

We might perhaps compare Witheford's conception of Barbarossa to the picture of King Offa, the medieval ruler famous for building a great dyke along the Welsh-English border, in Geoffrey Hill's magnificent poem-sequence *Mercian Hymns*. In Hill's hands, Offa is a man able and willing to put a precise economic value on every one of his subjects, and on every piece of his kingdom. With his coldness and his calculative mode of thought, he resembles some of the worst rulers of the modern era:

Offa Rex resonant with silver...

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value from a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres.

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring. It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger. He reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched the soil. (Hill, 1971: section 11)

In Witheford's poem, the Hawkes Bay earthquake - part of a 'fault' (the pun is surely deliberate) which has opened across the globe - perhaps symbolises the violent disorder that is, Witheford believed, an inevitable byproduct of modern societies. By February 1931, the Great Depression was in full swing, fascists and communists were fighting on the streets of Germany, Japan was preparing to invade Manchuria, and Spain was about to gain a Socialist government and begin its long slide into Civil War. Even small, relatively stable New Zealand was on the brink of a series of riots fuelled by unemployment and hunger. The ultimate act of modern horror would be the carefully planned, carefully documented extermination of six million Jews by the Nazi regime.

This horror began in earnest a decade and a few months after the Hawkes Bay quake, when Hitler launched the disastrous military adventure he named after Barbarossa.

I want to suggest that Witherford was able to move so easily and so unapologetically between real details of the earthquake of 1931 and inventions like the shot looters and the buried Ford-owners because the quake served in his mind as an analogue for the human disasters of the 1930s and 1940s. When he mentions the looting of shops and the execution of looters, Witherford makes us think of the proletarian unrest unleashed by the Great Depression, and of the lethal response to this unrest. His reference to the Napier bourgeoisie being buried in their Fords – Fords were popular symbols, in the 1930s, of modernity and affluence - may remind us that the wars and chaos of 1930s and 1940s also sometimes took a toll on the wealthier strata of Western societies, and in some places destroyed these strata completely.

C.K. Stead thought 'Barbarossa' the most compelling poem in *A Native, Perhaps Beautiful*; I think it the best poem in any of Witherford's books. In 'Barbarossa' the narrow, eccentric, and rather misanthropic worldview which makes many of Witherford's texts uninterestingly negative allows him to find a symbol for the worst decades of the twentieth century in the real and imagined details of an earthquake in a province of an obscure country on the edge of the world.

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