Home, House and Violence: A "Ghastly Domestic Tragedy," Invercargill, 1908

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ABSTRACT: For New Zealanders, the first decade of the twentieth century was a reckoning with late nineteenth century national mythologies of a "farmer backbone" society where social health was promised by an abundant agricultural economy (Belich *Paradise Reforged* p 153). But despite claims that a shift to cities would produce an inferior breed of New Zealander, in 1911 we officially became an urban society (of which, Ben Schrader drolly observed, fears of catastrophic national decline failed to materialise (Schrader "City Images" np.)). The corollary of urbanisation was the consolidation, through the 1900s, of the New Zealand suburb. Colloquially, this eventually becomes the cultural foundation of the "dream" of Pākehā culture, where Kiwis live in their own homes, insulated from the world in what would become a folk-tale paradise of quarter acres, half-gallons, and Pavlova pie (Mitchell *The Half-gallon Quarter-acre Pavlova Paradise*). But in Invercargill, in 1908, the fallacy of suburban paradise was confronted even as it was being forged. In the early hours of April 8th, in an action of inexplicable and horrifying violence, James Reid Baxter killed his wife, his five children, and then himself in an act of familicide ("Tragedy in Invercargill" p 9).

This heartbreak has been largely forgotten, and the human cost of the Invercargill Tragedy might have been best kept respectfully distanced from academic research were it not for the unusually explicit domestic descriptions of the suburban crime scene that were published at the time. Preceding the mores of modern journalism, and taking place prior to the widespread availability of photographic reproduction in newspapers, these accounts provide an unique, if uncomfortable account of domesticity at this time. This features full descriptions of the domestic interior, but, in a context where the perpetrator's motives remained elusive, the accounts go further and offer insight into the social norms and patterns of the 1900s home.

In this paper I unpick the architectural story of the domestic functioning of the Baxter family, as described at the time. In this procedure I am not seeking to sensationalise the violence, nor "solve" the crime. What I will do is explore the representational narratives of 1900s domesticity this case provides. In my argument the vivid descriptions of the Invercargill Tragedy spoke to a genuine desire at the time to understand the unthinkable, and it may be that the reason such domestic violence slipped so quickly from public consciousness was a realisation that actions cannot be simply blamed on houses, however suburban.

AI Statement: AI was not used in any aspect of researching and writing this paper.

In the early hours of April 8th, 1908, in suburban Invercargill, James Reid Baxter, in an action of inexplicable and horrifying violence, bludgeoned his wife and children while they slept, and then took his own life.[1] Basil (9), Roy (4) and Ronald (2) died in their beds. Elizabeth (37) and her remaining children, Phyllis (11) and baby John (six weeks), were discovered alive but succumbed to their injuries soon afterwards. At the time the atrocity captured the pages of every newspaper in the country, but this heartbreak has been largely forgotten now, and the human cost of the Invercargill Tragedy might have been best kept respectfully distanced from academic research were it not for how unusually vivid the domestic descriptions of the crime scene were. Preceding the mores of modern journalism, and taking place prior to the widespread availability of photographic reproduction in newspapers, reporting at the time provided a vivid, if uncomfortable account of domesticity in this decade. This features descriptions of the interior, but in a context where the perpetrator's motives remained elusive they go further and offer insight into the social norms and patterns of the 1900s home.

[1] "Tragedy in Invercargill" p 9.

The name J Reid Baxter first appears in the *Southland Times* on July 29, 1907, with the note that he participated in an animated debate concerning a paper presented to the Invercargill YMCA by Dr Hastings Young on "Cant in Religion."[2] Three days later his name appears twice more. Firstly, as a named import receiver of cargo from the Matheson and Co. trading vessel *Moeraki*, and later that same page, under the banner "Synopsis of New Advertisements," "J Reid Baxter" is identified as having opened business as a seed and plant merchant.[3] Details on Baxter's history are lost, but it seems he arrived at Invercargill, with his family, in mid-1907. This was probably a decision influenced by his brother, JS Baxter, who was already operating a successful business retailing directly from imported purchases. In this it is likely that Baxter saw a positive future for himself and his family in Invercargill. Events on the night of April 8th proved this a lost hope. On that date, as the *Southland Times* saw it, "unheard and unsuspected," James Baxter – "florist" – "committed one of the completest and most ghastly tragedies that have ever occurred in New Zealand."[4]

The facts of the events do not require sensational embellishment. Early in the morning Baxter moved through the three bedrooms of the Crinan Street house, methodically bludgeoning his family with a metal rake used to scape creosote from the coal burning stove, before locking himself in the bathroom where he shot himself in the head.

The scene was discovered by the City Missionary for Invercargill, Archibald McLean, who lived next door. His curiosity was aroused in the late morning (10:45-11:00) by the blinds that remained closed on the open window to the front bedroom, and the observation that "[p]rior to that there was no life or movement about the place."[5] McLean "ran straight across" to the South Invercargill Police Station, where he telephoned the police[sic], who arrived ten minutes later accompanied by an ambulance. There was, he would comment later, an "unusual stillness" to the house that raised his curiosity and in the late morning he proceeded to reach through the open window and raise the still drawn blind on the front bedroom.[6] The children Basil, Roy, Ronald, and Baxter (43) himself, were dead. However mother Elizabeth, daughter Phyllis, and "the baby," were found injured but alive. Margaret McRobie, the local nurse, gave first aid to the older two by cleaning their wounds and administering whiskey, but they were all to succumb to their injuries soon after hospital admission. James Baxter's body was found in the bathroom, where police found an extinguished candle, concluding "it was by the aid of this dim light that Baxter went his round and did his deadly work."[7]

From the beginning Baxter's specific motives were unintelligible, and reporters resorted to the three "ayes" to make sense of his actions: illness (claims of "British cholera"), injury (a recent knock to the head), and the inquest jury, who meet only a week after the deaths, and returned their verdict that Baxter killed his family and himself in an act of "impulsive insanity."[8] But this was made only more unfathomable when contrasted to the apparent harmony of his homelife, as identified in the orderliness of the interior:

> Hanging in the kitchen were clothes that looked as

[2] "Y.M.C.A." p 2.
[3] "Synopsis of New Advertisements" p 2.
[4] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.
[5] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.
[6] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.
[7] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.
[8] "The Crinan Street Tragedy" p 4.

though they had been recently ironed; in the scullery, piled up neatly as a good housewife would leave them, were cups and saucers that spoke of supper before bedtime.[9]

Entrenching gender divisions of the times, tidiness, cleanliness and organisation are presented as evidence for a loving mother, good wife and healthy home. That this contains a dangerously persistent myth can be illustrated in the infamous 1970 example of the murders of Jeanette and Harvey Crewe. In his relentless defence of Arthur Allan Thomas, who had been convicted of the Crewes' murders, David Yallop judged the home of the victims as deficient in normal domestic occupation. The baby's room he describes as "barren as a prison cell," windows are curtainless, floors bare, and Jeannette's dressing table is deemed devoid of any femininity: "The place – I cannot refer to it as a home – reeks of apathy."[10] In one particularly objectionable characterisation, Yallop writes:

The evidence of Harvey's mother Mrs Marie Crewe drew a picture of Jeannette the perfect mother, the perfect housewife. If that was an accurate picture, then either Jeannette Crewe had a complete nervous breakdown in the days that preceded her death or her house was subsequently ravaged by an army of sluts.[11]

The unpleasant accusation is that, through slovenly domestic attention, Jeannette Crewe invited violence into her house, and it requires a moment to remember that she was the victim.

A variation on the expectation that attentive domesticity is allied to the health of a family can be found in the 1994 shooting death of five members of the Bain family, in Dunedin. The eldest son, David Bain, was initially convicted of murdering his family, but, as in the Crewe case, a spirited public advocacy eventually led to his acquittal (Thomas was also pardoned). When presenting their formal judgement on the case, the Privy Council began with the domestic scene of the crime, describing the Bain house at 65 Every Street as "an old, semi-derelict, wooden house" in which "most of the rooms were dirty, squalid and very disorderly. They, and the caravan, contained large quantities of the family's belongings in disordered heaps."[12]

The assumption in both these examples is that a correlation can be made between domestic disarray and familial dysfunction, with the inference that a greater degree of chaos brings greater potential for social failure. In an easily retrievable photograph of Jeanette and Harvey Crewe's living room taken by the police forensics unit, the context of a familiar domestic interior is made confrontational by bloodstains and a narrative of unaccountable violence. However, the scattering of evidence indicators, are themselves evidence of a desire to impose order, clarity, comprehension and logic. In both examples, photography presents as Janus, with one face witnessing the darkest aspects of the human psyche, while the other seeks to make scientific sense of the human condition.

Houses stand as physical and symbolic indicators where violent death has occurred. In the case of the Bain family murders, the destruction of the house was sanctioned almost immediately by the wider Bain family. The neglect observed in the Bain house was a raw but convenient displacement for the complexities of domestic violence, and for some in the near community it might have been a necessary part of their grieving to see it burnt. In many other examples the houses are destroyed by anonymous arson attacks, prompting criminologist Trevor Bradley to

[9] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.
[10] Yallop *Beyond Reasonable Doubt?* p 41.
[11] Yallop *Beyond Reasonable Doubt?* pp 101-102.
[12] "David Bain V The Queen" at para 4.

suggest that, in the case of particularly shocking deaths, members of the local community are compelled to remove all reminders of the violence, and to pre-empt a house becoming the site of macabre pilgrimage.[13] Images of the Waikato farmhouse of Jeanette and Harvey Crewe, the location of their still unresolved murders, were, like those of the Bain house, widely distributed as a part of the reporting. With the Bain house, photographs were used to sensationalise the horror, but with the Crewe house they served to document to "townies" the alien character of rural life. It is less surprising that the Crewe house did not carry the same representative weight of the violence, despite the equally domestic nature of the violence. The remote location, I would suggest, reinforces expectations of increased vulnerability, and rural pragmatism dictates that a robust, well-maintained family home should survive its history.

Taking place in 1908, the Baxter deaths occurred before crime scene images became commonplace in newspapers, and so escaped a popular visual connection between the image of the house and the violence it contained. However, it needs to be noted that picturing crime scenes in New Zealand has not always depended upon photography. In April, 1886, Edwin Fuller shot 17-year-old Emily Keeling on King Street, Arch Hill, Auckland, and then killed himself nearby. The fatally-injured Keeling stumbled to the entry of Cuckson's store before expiring 20 minutes later, just as a doctor arrived.[14] The *Auckland Star* described a troubled young man obsessed with the devout Keeling, considering the deaths a tragedy. In an unusual printing decision for the time, the newspaper reproduced the site of the events using what appears to be an original wood block print. Cuckson's corner store is clearly identifiable, and the locations specific to the crime are numbered ("1. The Place where the murder was committed (view of Thomas's store). 2. Stanley Street. 3. King Street"). The reportage of the events is notably thorough in its account, and in places shows remarkable consideration for the lives of all those caught up in the violence, and also the architectural setting. The road surface where the shooting took place is identified as rough scoria, the steps in Cuckson's Store that the victim collapsed on are noted, and in one particularly striking passage, the room in which Fuller's body was held is described as being a "pleasant-looking, neatly furnished, little room in the point of the house, which even the drawn blinds and the awful presence of death did not deprive of an air of cheerfulness."[15]

It is telling, I think, that Cuckson's Store is labelled as being "of the same type as dozens that may be seen in our suburbs."[16] In this the illustration of the store serves two purposes. In the first it provides a vivid setting for the violence for those familiar with Arch Hill. The second motive, as the description alludes to, is to use the generic appearance of the corner store to suggest that such inexplicable violence could happen anywhere in Auckland's burgeoning suburban expansion. However, what is most notable about the newspaper coverage, including the illustration, is how they do not sensationalise the crime. Horror, at this time, appears to have been found in prosaic account rather than emotional editorialization.

Despite being described as a rare

[13] Bradley quoted, Earley "Why are so many murder houses burnt down?" np.

[14] "Love and Crime" p 2.

[15] "Love and Crime" p 2.

[16] "Love and Crime" p 2.

phenomenon,[17] murder-suicides are a frequent subject for academic research. One study from 2010 found that the majority of murder-suicides occur within intimate relationships, and that the private home was the most common location. It concludes in the neutral tone of academic writing, "a private home allows the perpetrator to complete the homicide and suicide in relative privacy."[18] Another study focused on Australia considered murder-suicide "essentially a domestic event,"[19] and a third project looking at homicide-suicide patterns in the Netherlands found that almost all homicide victims had a familiar relationship with the perpetrator, which underscored the domestic nature of such events.[20] Each of these studies was derived from contemporary data, but James Baxter is a tailored fit for the archetypal situation where the crimes are perpetrated by a male figure on their family, and in the family home.

The New Zealand cases I have referred to here are not all murder-suicides, but they do share elements concerning the values of sanctity we project on to the family home. The private home is widely considered as an emotionally-sacred sphere. As Bachelard wrote of it, "our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word."[21] In a functional scenario this narrative serves to support an understanding of the home as a place defined by safety and security, and by correlation promises to nurture those within it by protecting them from the intrusion of damage. But in a dysfunctional domestic scenario this promise can become inverted, with the home becoming an isolated and encapsulated cell of damage. In the view of Sam Jacob:

> Suburbia fragmented urban mass into a distributed, scattered field. It broke the collective urban mob into individuals. It drifted from the city out across the landscape like bubbles of dream-worlds: fantasy, nostalgia, escape, and Utopia wrapped up in a semi-detached plot. However, since its genesis, suburbia has been an ongoing, inside-out narrative. Its collective image is really a swarm of individual dreams. Its bright collective optimism hides dark individual pessimism.[22]

"Normalised" family life, and especially that found in the suburb, is defined by conformity. Individual households may be hives of variety, but taken collectively the social model for suburban life is one of convention albeit convention defined by cultural standards and expectations. This expectation was exploited in the reporting on the Baxter family deaths to intensify the inexplicable horror of the events. "Little things" are brought to the fore as evidence of a family following ordinary - read as "healthy" – homelife:

> And last, and most pitiful of all, in the bedroom in which Mrs Baxter and her baby were found. There lay neatly folded upon a chair a little pile of children's clothes. There was a clean white bib, newly pressed, there was a little suit of blue-stripped overalls, and there were little socks and stockings. That little pile told as plainly as inanimate things can tell of a mother and her "mending."[23]

It's impossible not to be moved by the scene of maternal care and young lives lost painted in this description, but we should also be mindful of how this plays into the romanticisation of domestic work, as epitomised in Melchionne's discussion of Phillip Johnson's Glass House, where "everyday domestic practice" (tidying, cleaning, ordering) is elevated to an aesthetic

[17] De Koning & Piette "A retrospective study of murder-suicide" p 88.
[18] Warren et al. "Murder followed by suicide" p 1596.
[19] Branes "Murder followed by Suicide in Australia" p 6.
[20] Liem & Koenraadt "Homicide-suicide in the Netherlands" p 487.
[21] Bachelard *The Poetics of Space* p 4.
[22] Jacob "Utopia of Fear" p 119.
[23] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

practice which, in its finest manifestation produces "grace" in the example of a homemaker who seeks to inhabit a beautiful space without become slave to it.[24]

That's a fine sentiment for a wealthy mid-century aesthete like Johnson, but we should be vigilant to being blinded by emotional sentimentality to the realities of domestic work in the 1900s. In a modern, industrialised home it may be possible, as Lee suggests, to find sensory affirmations and historical connection in simple phenomenological practices such as hand-washing,[25] but it is naïve to imagine that domestic life for Elizabeth Baxter consisted of anything other than arduous labour. As a family whose economic basis was found in a new small business, the Baxter household epitomised a lower middleclass unable to engage domestic service. In this we find, in the turn of the Victorian period to the Edwardian, a correlated shift in terminology from a house hold under the control of a "mistress" to one run by a "housewife" with housekeeping manuals advocating for the pleasures and dignity afforded to lower-middle-class women in looking after their own houses.[26]

The patriarchal privilege buried in this view was not left unchallenged. Contributing to the quintessential Victorian magazine for upper-class women, *The Queen*, in 1919, one Mrs Peel would state:

> The middle-class woman with a family cannot solve the question by becoming her own servant. The care of her children, the cooking and serving of meals, and the cleaning of the house are more than she can undertake without detriment to health.[27]

But there is absolutely nothing in the clipped description of Elizabth Baxter to entertain even the remotest possibility that she might be a Victorian New Woman given to smoking and riding a bicycle as badges of emancipation.[28] In fact, the reverse seems more painfully close to her truth. Her attention to having fulfilled her domestic duties so diligently should be viewed cautiously when we remember that this comes from a mother of five children, the youngest of which was only six weeks old. Allied to this is a statement to the inquest from Margaret McRobie, who testified that she had been employed to care for Elizabeth for a month during a recent illness, finishing on 27th March.[29] Those dates dovetail to the age of the baby and provide a case that Elizabeth had experienced a difficult birth from which she took at least four weeks to recover. In light of this the fastidious housekeeping identified takes on a problematic character as it suggests a level of attention inconsistent with a balanced appraisal of the work required to maintain a household. In this case the fact that the home didn't display qualities of neglect or inattention is itself a significant sign of dysfunction, and I would suggest that the Baxter home is an example of what Susan Fraiman has termed a "gothic" house:

> the house that imprisons rather than shelters women; that keeps them in thrall to norms of marital femininity; that hides domestic violence, exploits female labour, and thwarts female ambition; that binds some women in domestic service to others at the expense of their own households.[30]

This does not explain the events of April 8th, and it most certainly does not absolve Baxter, but it does challenge any assumption that the

[24] Melchionne "Living in Glass Houses" p 197.
[25] Lee "Home Life" np.
[26] Delap "Housework, Housewives, and Domestic Workers" p 193.
[27] Mrs Peel quoted, Delap "Housework, Housewives, and Domestic Workers" p 197.
[28] Tosh *A Man's Place* p 152.
[29] "The Crinan Street Tragedy" p 4.
[30] Fraiman *Extreme Domesticity* p 18.

health of a family is assured by a presentation of tidiness and order. As Dolan argued in her study on England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in representations of domestic crime, "the threat usually lies in the familiar rather than the strange, in the intimate rather than the invader."[31] Nonetheless, the anthropomorphic view that houses which look sick contain households that are unhealthy is widespread and enduring.

By challenging the domestic functioning of the Baxter household I have drawn attention to Elizabeth's place as an Edwardian homemaker. At this point I do want to be absolutely clear that I am not identifying her as an otherwise missing contributing factor in the violence that took place. If anything, I suspect she was an even more tragic victim than the reporting at the time admitted. In the remainder of this paper I will look at James Baxter. There is a risk that this might read as humanizing a monster. If that's the case, I would ask for patience. The violence he directed at his close family is not only unforgiveable, it is inconceivable, and while it does risk trivialisation to name it as an architectural research topic it does also seem to me to be important that we understand, if not the psychology behind such horror, then at least a bit more about the architecture of interiority contained in such bleak historic events.

In the weeks immediately prior to the events of April 8, James Baxter's behaviour was observed as being irregular, and in reaching their conclusion, the inquest jury found that Baxter acted under the effects of insanity, the chief feature of which "is an impulse to destroy."[32] While Baxter died at his own hand that night, it may be worth considering what this might have meant as a defence. Reviewing violent crime in England and Wales between 1832-1901, Ainsley found that woman were twice as likely as men to be acquitted on an insanity defence. It was the conclusion of this study that jurors frequently based their acquittal verdicts on a culturally-biased logic that assumed violence by a women in any situation must be the product of insanity on their part.[33] Baxter's suicide pre-empted any need for a courtroom defence of his actions, but in lieu of an obvious, or any, motivational factors behind such an unthinkable crime, the seeds of insanity were planted in the press. Baxter's behaviour towards customers was considered "frequently queer and suggestive of a mind distracted."[34] It was also forwarded that he had been ill with influenza, upon which he contracted "British cholera," and that he had recently hit his head after falling off a rock at Bluff.[35] In the fortnight preceding the murders he was judged to having been in a depressed state having complained of pains in his head, staying in bed some days, and on one occasion stealing a bottle of the opiate solution laudanum.[36] It is far beyond my area of expertise to account for these factors diagnostically, but I would suggest that, whatever Baxter's mental or physical condition, this evidence points to something more significant than a claim of "impulsive insanity," and recent studies have indicated a significant correlation between mental disorders and domestic violence.[37]

My point here, once more, is not to

[31] Dolan *Dangerous Familiars* p 4.

[32] "The Crinan Street Tragedy" p 4.

[33] Ainsley "Some mysterious agency" p 45.

[34] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

[35] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

[36] "The Crinan Street Tragedy" p 4.

[37] Oram et al. "Prevalence of experiences of domestic violence" p 95.

rehabilitate Baxter's reputation, but to identify the way in which claims of "insanity" are, perversely, the most sane way to accommodate a fear of inexplicable actions. As Eigen has shown, what set many Victorian insanity trials apart was the tendency to explore the moral consequences of such behaviour.[38] Suburban living, I would suggest, depends upon moral codes as its ballast against social instability. Largely, these codes are not only unwritten but unspoken, and rely on breaking collective values to reveal themselves, perhaps especially so when they encroach into the spatial experiences of others. As such, suburbanites are particularly attuned to recognising the malignancy of suburban perversion where it leaks into the phenomenological domain. This certainly includes entropy registered visually – abandoned cars, broken windows and unmown lawns – but suburban life holds a hyper-sensitivity towards audible misconduct, and especially at night. Music played loudly, lawn mowers started too early, voices raise in argument. These sounds cut across the any promise that suburbs are universally peaceful.

Sound, I will suggest, played a significant role in the domestic crimes I have been discussing. In the Bain family deaths the killer moved through the house with a rifle that had been silenced. The actual time that Jeanette and Harvey Crewe were shot remains uncertain as the rural location swallowed any audible register (or if they had been heard the reports might have reasonably been attributed to everyday farming practice such as pest control).

The Baxter family deaths similarly showed a special concern for sound. In the weeks prior to the killings, it is known that James Baxter not only bought a .22 Remington rifle, but that he then exchanged it for a more powerful 12 gauge shotgun after deciding that the rimfire calibre was too small to shoot rabbits with.[39] This was the firearm Baxter used to take his own life, but for his attack he used an iron stove scrapper to systematically bludgeon his family. Recorded as being 30 inches in length and with a hooked end, this might sound like a weapon of impulse, but its ubiquity to any turn-of-the-century kitchen with a coal stove means that it could relied upon to be available. So, an instrument of predictable domestic availability that allowed Baxter to move his violence silently through his house.

The moderation of light is another phenomenological indicator of suburban stability. Electric lights left on during the day speak to inattention, while unshielded dark rooms indicate absence. Conversely, rooms at night that are lit without curtains leave occupants vulnerable to observation, and rooms that are screened during the day suggest activities that need privacy. Natural light in the home is recognised as an important element for health,[40] and in the modern city artificial street lighting has become an important tool for controlling crime.[41] Lighting played a role in the discovery of the Baxter deaths.

Reportage on the deaths of the Baxter family universally identified the Crinan Street location, often with the qualification that it was normally quiet.[42] However, the exact street address was never disclosed at the time. I would not take this as being for privacy sake. In a small Southland town in 1908 it is

[38] Eigen "Lesion of the Will" p 425.

[39] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

[40] Ticleanu "Impacts of home lighting" pp 453-454.

[41] Farrington & Welsh "Effects of improved street lighting" np.

[42] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

probable that the house became notorious very quickly, and especially with children given that one small clue to the specific location is that it was "almost directly oposite [sic] the South School."[43]

In a time before photography became its own form of journalism, the point of a street number was mute. The horror of the Baxter deaths was not found in objective imagery but in an imagined one, and an oblique spatial location only widened the threat of a more universal violence. At the same time, the lengthy report published by the *Southland Times*, while explicit by today's standards, does give insight into a domestic realm that was probably common at the time.

As mentioned, the crimes were discovered by Archibald, who was able to access the home with police Sergeant Matheson on his arrival. The bodies of Basil and Roy were found in their beds. In the room immediately behind this one they found two-year-old Ronald and his sister Phyllis, who was unconscious. Across the passage was the parents' room, where Elizabeth was found in bed, and the baby in a cot, both alive but unconscious. Beyond the kitchen they found that the door to the scullery, which lead through to the bathroom, was locked from the inside. Not being pertinent to the discovery of victims (or the location of a perpetrator) no mention is made of a living room or dining area, but it is recorded that James Baxter's body was laid out on the kitchen table.[44] There is nothing to suggest that the house wasn't typical of any of the period, and in fact the description finds a match in EH Biss's floor plan for a Worker's Dwelling Act design where the bathroom could be locked from the kitchen using the scullery access.[45]

By today's standards the 1908 reporting on the "Invercargill Tragedy" is shockingly vivid as the writer walks a reader through the house in the immediate aftermath of the killings. Quite unlike the aftermath imagery of violence we receive from crime scene photographs, in the rawest article we share the horror of discovery with the reporter. This includes the devastating discoveries of Elizabeth Baxter and her children, and it extends to a very detailed description of the state of James Baxter's self-inflicted death.

Suicide is a taboo topic in contemporary New Zealand media, following Section 71 of the Coroners Act 2006, which sets out specific restrictions on reporting on self-inflicted deaths. In most cases, media outlets cannot make public the method of a self-inflicted death; offer any detail that might suggest the method; or provide a description of a death as suicide.[46] The reasons for such restrictions are found in evidence that certain kinds of suicide reporting can increase suicidal behaviour in vulnerable people.[47] The basis for this claim is an ongoing subject for researchers,[48] but while the period reporting on Baxter's self-inflicted death can be easily retrieved I won't be describing it here beyond the domestic context. But I am interested in the bathroom context that Baxter's body was found.

The bathroom, as I have identified, was at the back of the house and off a scullery. It is not stated but it is all but assured that this room, which was described as "very small,"[49] did not

[43] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

[44] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

[45] Salmond *Old Houses of New Zealand* p 227. Plan and perspective view of a Worker's Dwellings Act (1905) house, by E.H. Biss.

[46] Coroners Act (2006) § 71.

[47] "Reporting and portrayal of suicide" np.

[48] Prikis et. al. "The relationship between media reporting" p 2876.

[49] "A Ghastly Domestic Tragedy" p 2.

contain a toilet which at this time would have been found in an outhouse. It was hypothesised that following his attack, Baxter retreated to the bathroom where he locked the door, filled a bath, and shot himself in such a way that he fell into the water to ensure his death. The bathroom was called "loathsome beyond words," and found to be more repulsive than a slaughterhouse. But these confronting claims are made against the observations of a candle mounted on the edge of the bath and which had gone out, and the watch Baxter carried in his vest pocket that had stopped at 2.50.

In the Baxter crime scene the prosaic leans into the violent like a Wellingtonian to a howling southerly, drawing stability from the threat. If we are able to pinpoint the time, quantify the damage and categorise the circumstance, then maybe the sanctity of "home" can be buttressed against a threat that is found to hide within rather than without the walls. The photograph has become the preferred tool for building this bastion but it operates divisibly, prying apart models of domestic sanctity in the interest of quantifying violence. The Invercargill Tragedy, as found in the domestic interior, escaped becoming a visual spectacle of violence, but because of this we may well be left with an even greater sense of unease that a home can be found to be both faithfully domestic and shockingly feral. There is no conclusion to this account, but a culmination of sorts can be found in the probate outcome. In his will Baxter had bequeathed all his estate to his wife. I would say here that this was usual, and that it speaks to a will written for conventional interpretation. However, in this case, Elizabeth's death meant inheritance devolved to their children, and with the death of Phyllis, the last surviving child, the Public Trustee distributed what remained of the family home amongst her paternal and maternal relatives.[50] As an ending it offers the poignant reminder that, without the vibrancy of familial ritual, the artifacts and objects that define domestic interiority are merely dry detritus to be scattered amongst the living.

[50] "The Late J. R. Baxter" p 2.

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