

Leaving the Straight Path: Cultural Time Travel in the Seventies

MARK WILLIAMS

Victoria University of Wellington

In 1986, the Canadian poet, George Bowering, published a poem in *Landfall* which describes encountering the past when you visit New Zealand:

Everyone agrees,
when you visit New Zealand
you are back in the Fifties.
The Fifties! My father is still alive!
I looked round for him on the long main street of Wellington.
I kept turning on Cuba Street to see if he was behind me.
I listened for his quiet voice in the Auckland airport.
I lifted the brims of bent sheepmen's hats, looking for his face.¹

Here the gap between the present time of the rest of the world and the marooned time of New Zealand is a mere matter of three decades. It lacks the grand scale with which New Zealanders have often represented themselves to the rest of the world as separated by tracts of time as well as distance. For a country conscious of its youth, New Zealand has been surprisingly keen to image itself by way of antiquity: pastoral scenes, sublime mountains, a noble and ancient race draw the eye backwards in time. At the international Exhibition held in Christchurch in 1906-1907, a model pa displayed a perfectly preserved ancient race to visitors. As a traditional people, the Maori participants were even forbidden to use the mouth organ to accompany their songs.² A century later, the 100% Pure NZ campaign still attracts tourists with the prospect of Maori culture in the picture postcard poses of antiquity cultivated in the late colonial period. George Bowering's New Zealand is not the exotic Maoriland of moko and traditional dance or the primeval scenery of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*; it is merely a provincial version of the rest of the world, nostalgic, charming, amusing, vaguely irrelevant.

For those of us who grew up, placidly enough, in the fifties only to feel the pull of the modern in the early seventies, Bowering's New Zealand as

a place one enters by so trivial an act of time travel is more discouraging than the vertiginous leaps into imagined pasts offered by film and tourism. It evokes the shameful sense of being *just* behind – not romantic inhabitants of an imaginary unspoiled world but lagging citizens of the actual one. This is the source of embarrassment the baby boomers have struggled to eradicate over the last 30 years.

I associate the seventies with two related conditions: belatedness and embarrassment. The first condition was a product of coming just after the culture heroes of the sixties – the generation born around 1946 – who had already noisily broken with the rules of normalcy and decency that had governed post-war New Zealand. In the year I started university – the first of the new decade – I was well aware that others had made more outrageous gestures of opposition than I had courage for. Besides, I was ill-equipped for the strenuous demands of drug-taking and promiscuity; I lacked cool, I was easily embarrassed and, like most of my peers, I did not wish permanently to abandon the straight path, merely to visit the wild places.

Let me cite one small diversion from that path: the journey from Wanganui in the summer of 1970 up a dusty metalled road where sheep trucks, farmers and country boys in Holdens ignored city boys hitchhiking to Jerusalem. At the end of the journey was Hiruharama, signifying drugs, love, aroha and idealized poverty. It was a place where the disenchanted young went to find versions of the past – Maori, pastoral, communal – although most considered themselves in pursuit of an ideal future, trailblazers of consciousness heading away from the deadness of suburbia that Baxter calls ‘civilised coma’ in ‘The Ballad of the Junkies and the Fuzz’.³

For me, the experience of Jerusalem was not the consolidation of my vague anti-bourgeois ideology but the deepening of a suspicion about the counter culture, and especially about the drug culture. The little world of outcasts which Baxter conceived as a point of opposition to materialist and middle-class values turned out to be riddled with the snobberies and hierarchies of what it opposed. Up close, Baxter himself was a flawed messiah. His taste for flagellation and rumours of his heroic dedication to the sins of the flesh were at odds with the dour conformity of Irish Catholicism in New Zealand. But medieval extravagances did not add glamour to the religion of the Christian Brothers so recently escaped, and Catholicism seemed an unlikely way to get laid.

The road to Jerusalem was full of students that summer. Frank McKay remarks that many of them ‘used the place, and then moved off. Often they viewed Baxter with some cynicism’.⁴ Thirty years later, I would modify McKay’s judgement on the students who did not abandon a heartless bourgeois world for a local version of Franciscan charity, Indian village life

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or Maori traditionalism. The fact is that they came in numbers, captivated as well as sceptical, prepared perhaps to believe, though few were persuaded to do so. Unable to adopt Baxter's world-denying example, wary of his dramatic stances – 'dramatic' in the sense of being theatrical as well as extreme – equivocal about his contempt for middle-class comforts, they nevertheless shared his desire to reform the ossified structures of Pakeha New Zealand.

They sensed the flawed assumptions in Baxter's salvific social programme: that those rejected by society are necessarily spiritually purer than those caught up in it; that poverty ennobles those who willingly embrace it; that modern social life can be divided into the dead world of bourgeois materialism and the authentic world of tribal communalism. Caught between idealism and cynicism, the dream of a just society and the desire for self-advancement, their ambivalence registered the difficulties in any response to a social vision as wilfully eschatological as Baxter's. Nevertheless, it was they, not Baxter's chosen tribe of the wounded and outcast, who over the next two decades would shift a sluggish citizenry away from its Anglophile dreaming into the uneasy negotiations of biculturalism. It was they who, as teachers, professionals and civil servants, would protest against sporting contact with apartheid South Africa, cast their votes for a non-nuclear New Zealand and support Treaty settlements. It was they who would discover an enthusiasm for New Zealand literature, especially books by women, books by and about Maori, histories and biographies. And it was they, as publishers, journalists, cultural bureaucrats and readers, rather than the artist as romantic outsider, who would move the arts into the mainstream of New Zealand life.

Yet Baxter's influence should not be underestimated. Dying only two months before Norman Kirk's third Labour government came to power in December 1972 and having identified himself so potently with the disenchantment of youth, Baxter provided a model for idealistic gestures of the period like the ohu scheme, perhaps the most curious of the changes of the Kirk government. The ohu were government-backed communes modelled chiefly on the kibbutz, but they drew more generally on imported alternative culture, localizing the communal lifestyles of California in the sixties. The ohu also looked back to Baxter's Jerusalem and to a history of communes in New Zealand never before endorsed by the state. As government-sponsored alternatives to mainstream society, ohu were a tentative and confined experiment in taming Baxter's errant communalism and an attempt to conscript the idealism he had inspired in the young.

Baxter's death, as Bruce Mason put it, 'swept the country in a huge wave of grief',⁵ not simply because he was a famous poet but because,

like Janet Frame whose death also occasioned general mourning, he had become identified with the nation – an outsider who had entered the heart. His unappeased ghost lies behind the Pakeha interest in things Maori that made its tentative beginnings in the Kirk years and, nourished by antagonism to Muldoonism, sprang fully formed into national life in the mid-1980s. Baxter's image staring mournfully from the cover of the *Listener* sharpened the conscience of the Kirk years.

Jerusalem, moreover, provided impetus for the less millenarian refashioning of the nation that followed Baxter's death. It was a period in which New Zealand began the task of reinventing itself in more independent terms, setting the scene for the postcolonial endeavours of the 1980s. It did so mainly in symbolic terms: withdrawing New Zealand's token contribution of troops from a guttering Vietnam War, cancelling the 1973 Springbok tour, protesting against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, looking more positively and closely at regional ties to Asia and the Pacific. The ohu scheme and the government's attention to race relations were practical as well as symbolic expressions of the government's idealism, but neither involved radical or far-reaching change. Breaking with the immediate past, they also repeated an older past, the former by restaging settlement in communitarian rather than individualistic and capitalist terms, the latter by moving between active redress of Maori grievances and conscripting Maori once again into a display of national harmony.

In imagining a future independent of its colonial history, New Zealand has returned again and again to that very past, alternating between the twin impulses that drove settlement – pragmatism and social utopianism – both of which aimed to produce an improved version of the world left behind. The seventies split apart neatly along this division. While Muldoon returned the country to a simplified version of its past in which settler attitudes were made the basis of a defensively nostalgic and often aggressive nationalism, the Kirk government recaptured and extended the idealism and optimism that also informed colonial New Zealand.

Baxter had attempted to foist on the public conscience an issue which the new government only equivocally addressed: not how to 'improve' race relations but how to change the relationship between the two main ethnic groups. For Baxter, this meant that Pakeha must deeply examine their attitudes to Maori, and the education system 'must become saturated in the knowledge of Maori language and culture'.⁶ This was clearly beyond the scope or intentions of a government that would become increasingly preoccupied – erroneously in Baxter's system of priorities – with the economy. How would the new government address a history of making laws deleterious to Maori while reiterating the language of benevolent inclusion?

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As late as 1967, the Maori Affairs Amendment Act had extended the power of government directly to appropriate Maori land deemed 'uneconomic' and had allowed the conversion of Maori land with four or fewer owners to the status of 'European land'.⁷ Successive National governments had aimed to remove anomalies in law that protected Maori land. Yet rather than make radical reversals of existing law or initiate radical new legislation, Labour was content to remove the more egregious aspects of existing law. Towards the end of 1974, Matiu Rata, the first Maori Minister of Maori Affairs since Sir Apirana Ngata, introduced the Maori Affairs Amendment Bill. The Bill broadened the definition of Maori to include anyone with Maori ancestry, doing away with the ugly obsession with percentages of 'blood'; previously the definition required that one be 'half-caste' or more. The Bill also restored the pre-1967 status of land held in common, tightened the provisions for sale of such land and allowed for inheritance according to Maori custom. The Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975, but its brief was limited to the investigation of grievances from that date; it was not until 1985 that it was empowered to consider claims going back to 1840.

The Land March of 1975 potently indicated continuing Maori dissatisfaction about land loss, closing the period with an image to balance that of Norman Kirk on Waitangi Day 1973 striding forward confidently with the hand of a small Maori boy in his own: that of Whina Cooper and her granddaughter walking slowly along a dirt road from Te Hapua towards a different confrontation with history. In these two images, distinct understandings of biculturalism are concentrated. On the one hand, Maori in traditional costume are led forward by the smiling representative of a well-meaning government; on the other, dressed in European clothes worn Maori-style, they disappear into the landscape, bent on their own inscrutable purpose. The latter image could be that of Pipi who prowls on the edge of settlement in Blanche Baughan's 1912 story, 'Pipi on the Prowl', except that by 1975 the goal was not a cigarette or a sixpence, but parliament and the preservation not just of Maori land but of culture, language and identity as well.⁸ And Whina Cooper – imaged on television and interpreted by Michael King – would traverse more than the outskirts of Pakeha consciousness.

The reformist energies of the early seventies were driven by two historical memories – Maori and Pakeha – which overlapped but did not coincide. Many young Pakeha shared Baxter's idealism, although not necessarily with the same object. Young people on the political left were preoccupied not with the ongoing consequences of colonization on Maori but with a more immediate empire, America. In contrast to the old left, however, their oppositional ideology was liberationist like that which the Vietnam War had generated in America. Opposing one America, they replicated another. It was

an age both of idealism and of youth, drawing on the energies unleashed in the sixties. Norman Kirk had revitalized Labour after the 1969 defeat by moving away from the party's conservative trade union base towards younger urban intellectuals, by vigorously opposing the Vietnam War and by bringing forward younger candidates.⁹

Campaigning for the 1972 election, the Party used posters depicting a pristine environment inside a jam jar with the caption: 'It's preserving time'.¹⁰ But there were different views about what needed to be preserved. The collective memory of Maori was both longer and more specific to New Zealand than that of the young or the new left. Maori were accustomed to Pakeha governments which saw themselves as enlightened but which acted against their interests. Apirana Ngata at the turn of the nineteenth century had pleaded for 'a united Maori people, united for the maintenance of the best characteristics of the race, for its protections against well-meaning but cruel civilisations'.¹¹ Cruelty here was built into the purpose of advancing material 'civilisation' and Labour, for all its benevolent intentions, could not reverse the loss of land or the erosion of economic independence. At Jerusalem, Baxter conscripted his *nga mokoi* and *nga raukore* (the orphans and the wounded) into a religious vision which made them exemplary because they did not share in mainstream economic life; this too was a way of sentimentalizing Maori disadvantage. Baxter was aware of the political dimension facing Maori, but his overwhelming emphasis on the spiritual was in contrast with the mood of radical young Maori expressed in *Nga Tamatoa*.

Jerusalem was an experiment that failed in the sense that it generated misunderstandings and did not long survive the loss of its founding prophet.¹² But Baxter's poetic accounts of the period and the myth that grew around Jerusalem helped prepare a climate in Pakeha consciousness for the adventure of biculturalism. Changes in foreign policy, attention to immigration¹³ and opposition to nuclear weapons would all prove less fundamental in shaping the next three decades than addressing Maori grievances. Baxter's prediction that protests at Waitangi in 1971 meant that 'many Maori people will not be content until there are massive reparations both in land and in money for the wholesale seizures of the Land wars' was strikingly prescient.¹⁴ What could not have been predicted was that so many Pakeha would support Treaty settlements; Baxter as a mediating presence between Maori and Pakeha – a role assumed by Michael King without the prophetic guise – was enormously important in initiating Pakeha sympathy and interest in this process.

There was canny practicality in many of Baxter's social prescriptions; he both inhabits and stands aside from the romantic tropes of his cultural heroism. Doubtless, his cultural programme for New Zealand was unachievable in the

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radical terms he conceived it. Baxter himself had an imperfect knowledge of the protocols of the people he wished so devoutly to belong among. In urging his estranged wife, Jacquie, herself Maori and a poet, to join him at Jerusalem, he failed to take into account her tribal affiliations. Strictly speaking, Jacquie Baxter did not belong there herself.¹⁵ Nevertheless, such scepticism needs to be tempered by recognition of the exemplary nature of what Baxter achieved in altering the patterns of thought that governed social reality for Pakeha New Zealand. Myths, misunderstandings, lies, fantasies have always been present in the ways each has imagined the other, especially so in respect of Pakeha imaginings of Maori, but so also has the ability, just occasionally, to glimpse sympathetically another stance towards reality and to direct a knowledge of that stance at the complacencies and evasions of settled life. At Jerusalem, both misunderstanding and insight occurred, but the heroic quality of the experiment produced among many Pakeha if not a change in consciousness then at least a receptivity towards exploring and reinventing their relations with Maori.

In a survey of electoral history during the seventies and eighties, Alan McRobie observes: 'Beginning about 1970 the politics of stability and consensus gave way to the politics of volatility and increasing political polarization'.¹⁶ McRobie starts his essay with the Labour victory of 1972, yet the sources of change were already present when the government came to power. The 1969 loss to National broadened the constituency for change and encouraged the recognition of new value-driven kinds of reform. The seventies did not introduce the politics of polarization; they merely drew attention to the divisions between Maori and Pakeha, young and old, city and small town, which could no longer be avoided. In its most optimistic and forward-looking moments, as well as its savage and regressive ones, the decade looked back unwittingly to the foundations of Pakeha culture in the colonial period.

George Bowering's joke about New Zealand as the preserved fifties used to be told by New Zealanders against themselves; it is the kind of self-deprecating joke that is actually a boast, drawing attention to the country's charmingly arrested development. At the border, sprayed against bugs, one entered a safer world than the world elsewhere, where the pastoral values of simplicity and sincerity still prevailed. Such has been the staple marketing strategy of New Zealand tourism since the late nineteenth century when the lure of 'Maoriland' was spun in artists' studios, visitors' guides, steamship promotions, postcards and poems where one met not the fallen natives of the present but their noble warrior ancestors of myth.

Recently, the story has taken a new turn as stories circulate about how visitors have been surprised to find that New Zealand has caught up, and

is even at the cutting edge of food, fashion, film – all the contemporary signifiers of advanced global culture. This is a function partly of New Zealand's reinvention of itself as a creative country, a branding exercise modelled on Tony Blair's Cool Britannia but bolder in that the brand had no apparent precedents in New Zealand where the creative arts have traditionally been at a distance from normal life. No longer an embattled minority interest in a pragmatic society, creativity has become central to national life, spliced onto the modern economy by politicians aware of the ability of terms like innovation and creativity to segue profitably from arts to business.

Both these stories involve a version of time affected by distance: in one case, distance produces a lag, so that one falls into the past; in the other case, distance somehow transports the visitor forward in time, so that one arrives not in a pastoral retreat but in a polished version of the present. Both have their sources in late colonial settler culture when New Zealand was invented as a land at once ancient and modern: where idealized English and Polynesian histories had been preserved and where advanced social legislation and up-to-date technologies could also be found. Martin Blythe points out that, in late colonial New Zealand, two worlds, one modern and one archaic, were placed side by side so that the tourist could step from one to the other: 'Maoriland is a world outside time, a lost world even, into which the tourist may step briefly and tantalizingly before returning to the luxury and comfort of the nearby hotel, and the hotel is, of course, in New Zealand in real historical time'.¹⁷

In the seventies, actual time and imaginary time struggled for dominance. For a brief moment in the early seventies, settler society began a more clear-eyed and inclusive process of adjustment to the loss of its familiar bearings as Europe became more distant than it would manage later in the decade. Both halves of the decade repeated patterns established in the colonial period as well as in the sixties, but to repeat the past is probably inescapable; the trick is to do so not blindly and in a spirit of fierce resistance to the lessons it contains but by drawing on its moments of generosity and adventure. Between the deaths of Baxter and Kirk, the country almost managed that trick.

1 George Bowering, 'My Father in New Zealand', *Landfall*, 40, 3 (September 1986), p.281.

2 See Bernard Kernot, 'Maoriland Metaphors and the Model Pa', in John Mansfield Thomson, ed., *Farewell Colonialism: The New Zealand International Exhibition, Christchurch 1906-07*, Palmerston North, 1998, p.74.

3 This discussion covers ground in 'The Road to Jerusalem: James K. Baxter's India and Cross-Cultural Encounters in New Zealand', in Cynthia vanden Driesen and Satendra

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Nandan, eds, *Austral-Asian Encounters: From Literature and Women's Studies to Politics and Tourism*, New Delhi, 2002, pp.95-114.

- 4 Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter*, Auckland, 1990, p.261.
- 5 Quoted in McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter*, p.289.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.256-7.
- 7 K.R. Howe, *Race Relations: Australia and New Zealand*, Wellington, 1977, p.82.
- 8 See Michael King, *Whina: A Biography of Whina Cooper*, Auckland, 1983, p.206.
- 9 Alan McRobie, 'The Politics of Volatility', in Geoffrey Rice, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2nd ed., Auckland, 1992, p.386.
- 10 Michael Bassett, *The Third Labour Government: A Personal History*, Palmerston North, 1976, p.8.
- 11 Graham Butterworth, *Sir Apirana Ngata*, Wellington, 1968, p.8.
- 12 John Newton, who is writing a book on the Jerusalem commune, points out that it survived around three years at Jerusalem.
- 13 On 2 April 1974, Norman Kirk introduced restrictions on the hitherto free entry of Commonwealth citizens of European descent in response to rapidly increasing numbers of immigrants. The policy also removed the existing preference for 'British' immigrants. Quotas from the Pacific Islands followed shortly, designed both to check the rate of immigration and to protect the Island economies which were dependent on remitted wages from New Zealand.
- 14 See McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter*, p.269.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.240.
- 16 McRobie, 'The Politics of Volatility, 1972-1991', p. 385.
- 17 Martin Blythe, *Naming the Other: Images of the Maori in New Zealand Film and Television*, Metuchen, NJ, 1994, pp.53-4.