

# 'My poems will speak to you better than I do'<sup>1</sup>

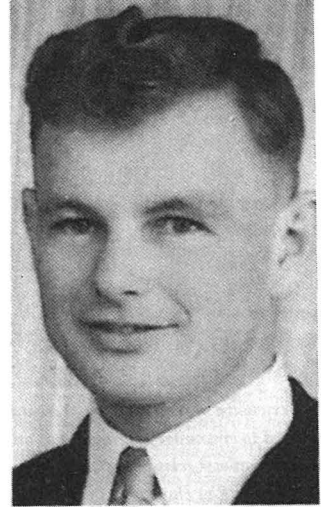


## *James K Baxter's letters on poetry to Noel Ginn*

PAUL MILLAR

*Paul Millar is an Assistant-Lecturer in the Department of English at Victoria University of Wellington. He is currently writing a doctoral dissertation on 'Comparative Representations of Cultural Identity in Australian and New Zealand Literature.'*

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James K. Baxter, in his essay 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet', identifies a number of factors that influenced his development as a writer. Dominant among these is a tangible sense of grief attached to his early life that his objective recollection of childhood as a happy time was unable to erode. This 'sense of grief — even at times a sense of grievance', Baxter muses, may have determined 'the rather gloomy tone of my verse' but at the same time 'helped me to write poems.'<sup>2</sup> Clearly this sense of grief added impetus to Baxter's tendency to mythologise his life in verse, but the compulsive nature of such mythologising stems more directly from what he identified as 'a sense of difference, of a gap ... between myself and other people'<sup>(123)</sup>. This gap, 'in which the poems were able to grow', was the product of a number of negative experiences that 'were in the long run very valuable, for they taught me to distrust mass opinion and sort out my own ideas.'<sup>(123-4)</sup>

While not discounting Baxter's recollection of the influences on his poetry, certain positive elements developing out of the negative aspects he recalls also appear to have played a significant role. In particular, I would argue that the sense of difference that Baxter recalls so vividly must be balanced against his close friendship during the same period with a young man named Noel Ginn. The extent and timeliness of this friendship has only recently been fully revealed. What Baxter seems to have forgotten is that Noel Ginn understood the 'gap' also, and in it he too propagated poetry.

While researching Baxter's biography Frank McKay made contact with Noel Ginn, and was given access to a series of letters Ginn had received from Baxter. In Ginn's possession was a group of fifty-five, the first written in August 1942 and the last in July 1946. They range in length from the briefest note through to a letter of 20 November 1943 that had appended all twenty-seven stanzas of Baxter's 'Ode: Where Nets of Time Encircle and Destroy.' The letters alone total almost forty thousand words. The largest portion refers to Baxter's poetry, and there are forty-five poems included. Numerous other poems were originally enclosed with the letters, of which Baxter discusses one hundred and forty. Of the poems Baxter included or mentioned, only slightly more than ten percent have been published.

The following discussion of Baxter's letters to Ginn is not an exhaustive summary of their contents. Rather my aim is to indicate their scope and tone in a way that will, I hope, further emphasise the enduring relevance of Baxter and his poetry to the study of New Zealand literature.

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*Left: James K. Baxter, c 1943, in a photograph taken for the publication of Beyond the Palisade. Otago Daily Times.*

*Right: Noel Ginn, c1937, at the age of around twenty-one. Private Collection.*

*Opposite: A facsimile of 'Letter to Noel Ginn', as published in Beyond the Palisade.*

Noel Ginn's name is, of course, familiar from Baxter's poems 'Letter to Noel Ginn' and 'Letter to Noel Ginn II'. Evidence in the letters suggests that the first of these poems was written by Baxter in direct response to a poem by Ginn. On 16 January 1943 Baxter wrote:

Thank you very much for the poems sent on by your sister. They have not quite the force of 'Overture to Unbelief',<sup>3</sup> or rather they have a different kind of force. 'To Jim' is, I think, the best. 'To Noel' is here enclosed.<sup>(28/6)</sup>

'To Noel' is most probably a reference to 'Letter to Noel Ginn', despite J.E. Weir estimating the date of composition to be almost a year later.<sup>4</sup> During the period of their correspondence, Baxter discussed his poems with Ginn in considerable detail. My alternative dating is based on there being no further reference to another poem 'to Noel' until late 1944 when Baxter was attempting to finalise the verses to be included in *Beyond the Palisade*. In this letter to Ginn he asked:

Would you mind, Noel, if I put 'Letter to Noel Ginn' in the volume I may be bringing out at Xmas? It fits perfectly, only your approval required.<sup>5</sup>

With 'Letter to Noel Ginn' having been written in response to Ginn's own poem 'To Jim', it is clear that the correspondence was rewarding. It was, however, a relationship formed at a high price, as the events surrounding it had profoundly affected the Baxter family.

The years 1941-1945 were difficult years for the Baxter's. During the First World War Archibald Baxter had 'suffered almost to the point of death as a conscientious objector'<sup>6</sup> Now, despite being ineligible for conscription, war once again intruded to test Archie's pacifist convictions. In some respects this second test must have been more exacting. Having a family that shared his pacifist convictions was tempered by what he perceived as a deliberate attack on him through his eldest son Terence.

When, late in 1941, nineteen year-old Terence Baxter appeared before the Appeals Board as an objector he was,

## Letter to Noel Ginn

They can admire the empty lion-skin  
The heart skewered by print, who will admire:  
But from you, Noel, I wish more—  
The friend's stance, confessor for my sin  
Which is pride alone: yet pride alone will win  
Niche of immortal marble despised and hungered for.

As a child I was childish . . . . an intuitional ease;  
Had missed the vice of sensitivity;  
Waded the flood-race of a century;  
But felt capacity for pain increase  
Till each day no longer a wood of peace  
Held larks of shelleyan song, tigers of poetry.

When I saw Europe . . . . a kaleidoscope  
Fluttered, flashed elusive in place of the grave  
Time-wading fortitude:—oil-weighted wave  
Feathering bows forever; blind seascape;  
Nights of storm, screw thudding; Gibraltar cape—  
Peered through field-glasses, played chess till nausea claimed  
her slave.

Or earlier: in Australia the hot days;  
Mast-cracking Sydney bridge; golden Colombo  
With fishing-fleets on estuaries to show  
A bird's plumage, a bird's surf-shadowing ways;  
A camel scrubbed upon the banks near Suez;  
Crete's iron citadel; and Plymouth bitter with snow.

London claimed me: she was heavy and huge;  
Her barges, and her dank wharves flecked with soot;  
Placarded Tubes; and fog at Christmas; mute  
Paling and palace. The Cotswolds were a refuge:  
Leaf-mould . . . stone . . . thatched roofs . . . blackberry hedge;  
Lanes, willows . . . snow-slush; bells; homesickness; running  
the gauntlet.

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his mother records, dealt with unusual severity:

We thought that because his father had been an objector in the first war he might get an exemption. He did not, only a recommendation to non-combatant service, which he would not accept. . . . A board had been set up to deal with cases like this . . . but before anything could be settled he was called up in the Police Court and sentenced to detention for the duration of the war.<sup>7</sup>

The family saw this as a disproportionately harsh penalty, and Millicent surmised that Terence's detention may well have been the result of official confusion between him and his cousin John. Whatever the reasons, she records that the



'whole thing was a terrible blow to Archie' inducing in him feelings of rage of which he was ashamed.

Interestingly Terence's predicament, like the correspondence with Noel Ginn, is not mentioned by Baxter as having significant influence on his poetry. Yet both situations occurred during the years that appear to have constituted Baxter's initial phase of authentic development as a poet. The lower limit of this phase, if Baxter's chronology in *The Man on the Horse* is to be believed, follows his 'earliest poems, written from seven to fifteen, [that] were undoubtedly imitative,'<sup>8</sup> and concludes not long after the publication of *Beyond the Palisade*. The existence of this upper limit, and its approximate date, is suggested by a number of comments that Baxter made to Ginn commencing in early 1944. In March he wrote 'I am not satisfied with my poetry,' and decided instead to try prose because 'prose-poetry [is] of the adult.'<sup>9</sup> He did not abandon poetry but his problems with it continued through May — 'Maybe a phase, but phases hurt'<sup>10</sup> — and into July, as the post-script of a letter dated 16 Jul. 1944 records:

I am emerging from the 'globe of dream' which produced 'The Unicorn' and others. My poems may change, I may even stop writing for a bit, but one must not retard development by attempted 'freezing' in one phase.<sup>11</sup>

Baxter did not freeze in this second phase, but marked it with the publication of *Beyond the Palisade* and moved on. The phase had certainly concluded by May 1945 and he was looking ahead with renewed confidence:

I see faint hopes, Noel, of a new verse-efflorescence for myself. The images might even flow truthfully and easily. After all, I have only quarried painfully in childhood and adolescent stone. If I could acquire a bit more insensitivity, I might even eventually gain something of the standpoint of Burns ... I have written all my *Better beast or unborn ...* poems.<sup>(28/52)</sup>

The significance of a phase that can produce a collection like *Beyond the Palisade* cannot be underestimated. It is curious, therefore, that Baxter, in his own recollections, allocates no part in it to either his brother Terence or to Noel Ginn. In fact 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet' gives the impression that although Baxter showed all his poems to his father their birth 'in the foggy Belsen of the imagination' was a solitary secret.<sup>12</sup> This impression is at odds with a comment Baxter made to Ginn in a letter written in 1943:

I write to you because  
'There is only half-life in the separate safe bone-banner-  
scroll of an ivory skull.'

In other words, what I write is useless unless there is someone appreciating it. My father has full appreciation of most of what I write, my mother knows and likes the best ones, but they are not 'intellectual' in the way that you are — or not quite anyway.<sup>13</sup>

The key to Baxter's selective amnesia may well have been the lasting effect that Terence's incarceration, and the impending probability of his own, had upon him. His letter, written on 20 November 1944, discussing the consequences of the failure of an appeal on conscientious grounds has, at first, an air of bravura about it:

I may or may not get it according to the policy of the board.

If I don't get it, I guess I'll be joining the ranks of the faithful.

Either way it is a good thing — it solidifies my principles.<sup>14</sup>

However, the sentence immediately following is probably a more accurate indication of his state of mind: 'Of late I've not felt much like writing letters; a periodic wave of depression.' Certainly it is consistent with another comment regarding Terence's situation that Baxter included in a letter to his friend Margaret Hargreave:

I have a pain in my mind whenever I think of it, he has so much vitality and he's shut up. I don't like to write about it.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, variations on the phrase 'I have a pain in my mind' occur twice in Baxter's letters to Ginn. First in a letter written near the end of 1943: 'You, Terry, and indeed all the rest of them being shut up is a sore spot in my mind when I think of it.'<sup>16</sup> And again seven months later: 'Terry is a lone wolf, "dark and sensitive" I think of him as — and when I do think of him that indescribable grip of consanguinity [*sic*] makes my mind sore.'<sup>17</sup> This pain — described in a poem to Terry as the 'intolerable ache' — is, Baxter

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*Terence Baxter, aged 24, from Memoirs of Millicent Baxter, Cape Catley Ltd, Whatamongo Bay, New Zealand, 1981.*

explains to Ginn, 'in part a feeling of guilt at having been too narcissist to have tried to understand Terry.'<sup>18</sup> There is no doubting the very tangible feelings of guilt and pain Baxter associates with Terence's incarceration; feelings that he seems to have preferred not to discuss. As a consequence Baxter's relationship with Noel Ginn — because it was intimately connected with Terence's situation — was not discussed either. As Baxter writes in the same letter: 'it is easier to write clearly and coldly than to explore the forbidding jungle that we call emotion.'

So who was Noel Ginn, and how did his correspondence with Baxter come about? It began with Terence's confinement in defaulter's detention. Ginn was one of Terence's hut-mates: a university student with an interest in poetry and literature, he was also to become one of Terence's close friends. In a letter home Terence mentioned his hut-mate with the interest in poetry and James Baxter responded by enclosing a number of poems in his next letter to Terence, suggesting that 'you show the man my poems.'<sup>19</sup> Ginn, recognising the quality of the poetry, wrote back almost immediately. Baxter's reply, in a letter dated 9 August 1942 begins:

Dear Noel, (I can hardly say 'Dear Mr Ginn.' That would sound too unfriendly.)  
I was very pleased to get your letter. Any criticism you have given is certainly constructive. Everyone, versifier or otherwise, must at times feel 'the pain of incoherence.' No one can write more than is in themselves.<sup>20</sup>

It was the beginning of a continuous correspondence extending into 1946, and it set the tone for the future with its immediate focus on poetry.

Because of their breadth and sophistication it is easy to forget that all but two of Baxter's letters to Ginn were written while he was in his teens. When he commenced writing he was one month past his sixteenth birthday and by the time the correspondence had begun to peter out he was barely twenty. The period covered includes Baxter's third and fourth years at King's High School in Dunedin (1942-43), his year at Otago University (1944), and 1945, when he had published *Beyond the Palisade* and — against all advice — abandoned his studies and worked firstly at an iron foundry and then at Wanaka Station.

Baxter's side of the correspondence is dominated by discussions of poetry, but includes sufficient personal glimpses to paint a portrait of an exceptionally intelligent and talented adolescent, struggling at the same time to find his way in the world and cope with the turmoil that the war has brought upon his family. The tone of the letters ranges from sophisticated discussions of literature to observations about life that are at times quite profound. Occasionally there is an overbearing precociousness, but only rarely a hint of an earthy sense of humour. Ginn's own experiences in defaulter's detention were traumatic, and his situation may have been un conducive to that form of levity. Explaining to Frank McKay in 1983 why he had not kept any of his own poetry, Ginn wrote 'For me the

intense emotional experiences of the war years had to be distanced & I was incapable of separating out the poetic component.'<sup>21</sup> The fact that everything received by the prisoners first passed through the hands of the camp censor, may also have affected the letters' tone and content.

In another letter Ginn recalled for McKay his first meeting with Baxter after James and Millicent had, in August 1944, travelled north to visit Terry in detention:

My first impression was of Jim's enormous head, and his loose, almost shambling, gait. That head I thought is like a lamp held before his body ... The meeting was brief and stimulating. We did not meet as strangers as our correspondence had made us acquainted mentally and emotionally ... What was new was the rich cadence of his voice and the engaging bashful manner contrasting with the quality and authority of his speech.<sup>22</sup>

The journey had, if anything, been more significant for Baxter. As he told Ginn in his next letter: 'It was very good for me to see you and Terry. It sort of straightened out things in my mind.'<sup>23</sup>

Following his release from detention, late in 1945, Ginn was to spend a fortnight with the Baxter family. It was, he wrote:

... a period of emotional disarray and confusion. The air was thick with the names of dispersed friends and acquaintances, much news, always change. Jim was part of this ferment, but his disorientation was from a different base. There was exhilaration as we talked of poetry, of life and world affairs, there was much humour also, and I was learning of Jim's first forays into the realms of sex.<sup>24</sup>

There is ironic humour in Baxter's letters to Ginn, almost a tendency towards self-deprecation. If you had seen me at Friend's school, he wrote 'I would probably have replied in monosyllables or shown signs of apparent deficiency.'<sup>25</sup> A similar tendency occurs from time to time in what appear to be attempts to tone down some particularly strident piece of criticism. For example:

After reading a poem of Empson's I feel that I have excavated in sand and found — sand. These are the words of the hawk's-eye observer, not of J.K.B. I, being fallible and vain, commence to write a poem in the style of Empson.<sup>26</sup>

Explaining a cryptic note in another letter he wrote: 'S. A. is sex appeal. My best poems have been written when I have imagined myself in love.'<sup>27</sup>

Naturally, Baxter's letters also contain the day to day information that punctuates most correspondence:

It is strange you should speak about pain. I have been going to the dentist for a day or two, and so it is occupying my mind somewhat. In the dentist's chair one feels the urgent need for another channel for release of energy and attention — hence the squirming.<sup>(28/8)</sup>

He records in October of 1943, his delighted impressions of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, and in the following letter gives Ginn his recipe for relieving stress: 'If I feel gloomy, if I have conflict, I can jump on a bicycle and feel happy.'<sup>(28/20)</sup> By the time he reached university he was socialising more frequently than he had been at high school; a fact he seemed

keen to impress upon his brother:

Went to the Freshers' Hop and got one or two long-suffering females to haul me round the floor. It was very enjoyable on the whole. I will write at further length on this to Terry.<sup>28</sup>

Although the numerous biographical glimpses are interesting, the true value of Baxter's letters to Ginn lies in their focus on poetry, and in what they reveal about Baxter's development as a poet.

At the time Baxter was writing to Ginn his poetry was essentially experimental. He was reading widely and, in the course of his letters, refers to the work of more than eighty literary figures — most of them poets.<sup>29</sup> His aim, it seems, was to serve a poet's apprenticeship studying the work of others before developing his own verse forms. The early stages of this developmental process are documented in his letters to Ginn. They show that Baxter's imitative phase had indeed concluded by the time he was sixteen — he was no longer attempting straight mimicry of other poets but borrowing critically when producing his verse. Established forms and styles were becoming little more than frameworks for poems whose content was, increasingly, personal and local.

During this period Baxter's predominant literary influences were not from New Zealand, although he had strong opinions on the situation of New Zealand literature and on the requirements for producing poetry here. Having read a book of Canadian poetry, he commented to Ginn that it was like New Zealand poetry, that is 'modern in form but trite and rigid in thought.'<sup>30</sup> He understood instinctively that the literary practices of the 'new world' could not be the same as those of the 'old world', and was concerned that 'most colonial writers seem to follow at the hub of the true poets of the Old World to pick up their forms but none of their fire.' In another letter he argued that 'natures are produced by environment [and] colonies do not seem the right environment for the poetical nature ... any poet of great fire who did happen to spring up would try to shift.'<sup>(28/8)</sup> Reflecting on this opinion he conceded that the source of his 'unconscious be-littlement of N.Z.' could stem from an earlier trip to Europe with his family 'the pleasure of [which] is no doubt acutely stamped on my subconscious.'

Ginn obviously took exception to some of his views about New Zealand literature because in February 1943 Baxter was defending his position:

About N.Z. poetry. I am not crying it down. But I find in poetry a vivid expression of emotion which does not occur in prose. Therefore, as I do not find this in much N.Z. poetry it is not, to me, poetry. The solution, of course, is not to run away but to start a Revolution.<sup>(28/9)</sup>

It also appears that Baxter was intent on being part of the revolution. Apart from expressing a brief interest in a return visit to Europe, his focus was as firmly antipodean as his reading was European and American. He confided to Ginn that they were the future of New Zealand poetry, and he had firm ideas about what New Zealand literature needed; ideas that intuitively compensated for the lack of

heritage and history in a settler colony attempting to speak a language transported from the other side of the world. Where 'Europeans have to prune their material' he told Ginn, 'we have to build it up.' Hence his criticism of 'Sargeson, who' he wrote 'strikes me as able but of a style and plotting too cut-down for this N.Z. society.'<sup>(28/42)</sup>

Whereas Baxter's imitative phase was a period of sustained absorption, his second phase of development could well be characterised as one of aggregation: a fusion of techniques, images and elements from numerous sources. The poems he had been imitating no longer saturated his verse with their content, instead their contribution was technical — a provision of structure and form. In the poetry of this phase Baxter begins to harmonise and reconcile his diverse experiences of literature, culture, and literary and cultural practices to produce in his verse — at first unevenly — a syncretic vision that is, in terms of the current discussions of such literature, characteristically post-colonial.

Discussing his early version of the poem 'Rain Ploughs', Baxter explained to Ginn the importance in his poetry of this relationship between the 'old verse forms' and the poem's content — that is, the contributions made by 'memory and emotion':

The line you wish to know is —

'Grove, slope I slate-entangled rune, but rise, shall rise, to green.'

'Slate' signifies roof — especially of old houses — and hence human habitation. The Romans used 'tectum' — roof — to signify 'house'. I 'grope' in the darkness of memory and emotion, I labour upward, not directly but on a 'slope', from amateurism by the old verse-forms: yet eventually I will flourish in greenery like a tree.<sup>(28/3)</sup>

Thus poems like 'Spring Pastoral' and 'The Rose of Solitude' were, he wrote: 'traditionalist, purposely so. It is a good exercise to do this occasionally because traditionalism is useful sometimes.'<sup>(28/11)</sup> As a closer look at different versions of 'Rain Ploughs' reveals, however, tradition was only useful up to a point. The version of 'Rain-Ploughs' that Baxter sent to Ginn in his letter of 28 Aug. 1942 differs substantially from that printed in *Beyond the Palisade*. The published version has a flow and coherence that the earlier version lacks. The process by which the published poem was arrived at is in many respects symbolic of the process of change that was occurring in Baxter's verse during this second phase of his poetic development.

Referring to the earlier version Baxter explained to Ginn that although the third verse 'may seem to you like G. M. Hopkins gone mad ... you must imagine in it all the elements, incoherence and storm.'<sup>31</sup> :

Wrong, rather song if battered bent by rain;  
Join elementals in reef-erosion  
Break, slake from blinding sky disintegrate explosion;  
Molten, smelted in branched channels run,  
Spirit sponging out  
Move universal god-whole new-arisen.  
Bound in, shut,

Blanketed in pierced-not shade  
Grope, slope I slate-entangled rune; yet rise, shall rise to  
green!

This stanza suggests that Baxter's quest for his new verse form was hard work — much more a labour than an efflorescence. However, the corresponding verse in the published poem shows the progress he was making towards a new form:

Yet hope stays for him who dare.  
Dost see yonder the angel-Archer stand?  
Frail-veined twig in hand  
By blinding sky fire-tipped he doth bear:  
Fire-feathered arrow-thought to set new sun on flare  
Brave djinn and monster, green again the land.<sup>32</sup>

The control over his material that Baxter demonstrates in the published version does not only relate to the tightening up of the form by abandoning a particular tradition — that is, less like 'Hopkin's gone mad' — but also a tightening of the content. Where the phrase in the first version 'yet rise shall rise to green' suggests a process in progress, 'green again the land' — indicates a process completed. It is significant that the later version — the publication of which marks the conclusion of Baxter's second phase — loses the personal pronoun. The poem's subject is no longer explicitly Baxter groping upward eventually to flourish, as he had predicted to Ginn. Instead the land — metaphorically the poet's *oeuvre* — flourishes in a cycle of renewal that follows naturally from the rending of the rain-ploughs. Cultivation stimulates the germination of both vegetation and verse through the benison of the 'Fire-feathered arrow-thought'. The apocalyptic angel-Archer — consistent with the Blakean influences on Baxter — points, as does the revised structure, to Baxter's developing mythopoetic tendencies.

Baxter would tell Ginn repeatedly that good poetry is strong poetry, and strong poetry demands clarity and vitality. In one letter he asserted that 'all obscure poems must have a thread.'<sup>33</sup> This belief was central to his criticism of the moderns, of whom he had an extensive collection. In the same letter he told Ginn, while discussing Ginn's own poetry, that one should 'have a basis of traditionalism and veneer of modernism to give facility of expression and mood. Thus one can study old masters and violent moderns with perfect enjoyment and equanimity.' His concern was that 'The rigid modern can lose, by a habit of mind, power of appreciating the early 'dreams' of Yeats; and ludicrously underestimate the essential force of clarity.'<sup>(28/14)</sup> In a later letter he argues:

Yeats ... has unconsciously recognised a modern trend. Our eyes slide over a page; not words but phrases we read; the sound is unheard. Thus concentration of meaning evaporates. Yeats is the master of the phrase, and so for us there is magic in him.<sup>34</sup>

Baxter's attempts in his late teenage years to alleviate the 'pain of incoherence' through writing poetry, while realising at the same time 'that no-one can write more than is in themselves', were tempered by the knowledge that

not every personal experience makes good poetry. It was Baxter's enduring conviction that, as he told Ginn in January 1943, 'the essence of poetry is emotion.' A point developed in November of the same year when he wrote:

If I thought the meaning of a poem was all that mattered, that the verse-form was merely for adornment and easy remembering, I would rewrite all my poems in simple prose. But emotion is the essence of poetry: vowel-music promotes it, rhythm facilitates its flow. Naturally, one wants original thought; but it is the emotional force, not the reasoning force, that makes the poetry.<sup>35</sup>

By emotion, Baxter meant active rather than passive emotion. He did not believe that any 'inertly miserable man has ever written good poetry',<sup>(28/13)</sup> and he found the poetry of the 'heart criers' banal,<sup>(28/19)</sup> arguing four months later that the 'best poetry of course has perfect welding of image and emotion.'<sup>36</sup> In January of 1943 he had written: 'among twenty poems of mine there are 18 of varying quality, one trash and one really good. Incidentally, the one "really good" usually expresses strong emotion, the one trash is emotionless obscure jargon.'<sup>37</sup>

In 1945, following the publication of *Beyond the Palisade*, the tone of Baxter's letters briefly alters. The boyish charm of the earlier letters — characterised by the need at times to explain himself, or seek Ginn's approval — is replaced by a degree of condescension. In a letter dated 1 May 1945, reacting to criticism of *Beyond the Palisade* he wrote 'better to err with Burns and Byron than fall in line with Brasch.'<sup>(28/52)</sup> He then proceeded to criticise Ginn's own poetry, before returning to the theme of emotion but this time with what was, for his letters to Ginn, an uncharacteristic qualifier:

Your poem, like so many of yours, seems to me to have excellent phrases but be not quite crystallised. I lean to the belief that if one only feels unifying emotion once in 10 years one need only write one poem in 10 years. — Sexual feeling has the advantage of lasting emotionally for at least a week, enough for 7 great lyrics.

Having published successfully Baxter more readily criticised Ginn's poetry, writing in December 1945:

Your own images seemed to have insufficient root, as Curnow's often do. I am sure if I was writing in association with you, that I could *cure your ills of the water with a one coloured calm*.<sup>38</sup>

The mask of 'the world weary published poet' slips however; Baxter's conclusion to this letter is almost plaintive: 'Love to Terry, wish I could see him just now.' By 23 June 1945 the novelty of his first book seems to have worn off. The tone of this letter is back to normal: Baxter discusses the purchase of books, praises one of Ginn's sonnets and notes that 'I am doing well enough at the foundry — a source of material income, if not aesthetic. £2/6/3 minus 7/6 busfare.'<sup>39</sup> His subsequent letter, dated 14 July 1945 includes a contrite apology for having presumed that Ginn would pursue a particular course of action: 'I am sorry I took it for granted that you would appeal.' he writes. 'Can see clearly your point of view and sympathise.'<sup>(28/54)</sup>

Returning to a point already noted in passing; obscurity was particularly repugnant to Baxter. He told Ginn:

Only by necessity should one even start on the road to obscurity. One should say (i) need I say it? (ii) could I say it better in another form? (iii) following forth from (i) — has it sufficient vigour or clarity to make it poetry or even good verse? Those who in the Victorian era could be recognised as mediocre by their sentimentality cannot now be classified owing to the refuge of obscurity. Obscurity becomes a cult when the vital necessity that poetry should say something is lost.<sup>(28/14)</sup>

Hence his criticism of the moderns:

The genius of Hopkins prevents true obscurity, but the intellect of Empson does not. The modern, fed on curry, loses taste for unseasoned food; through concentration on his own epoch he has narrowed his range of consciousness ... I have read many fine poems; but vitality, vitality is needed — and with vitality comes sufficient clarity.

Baxter found reason to lament the diminishing interest in poetry. Associating it with what he perceived to be a modern tendency — unconsciously recognised by Yeats — to read not words, but phrases. He wrote early in 1944 that:

The heyday of poetry *lived* (??) when a word was still miraculous, when use and misuse had not dulled it to a smooth grey pebble. What force now has 'light thickens'? The association is curdled [*sic*] milk, I think. It is not understanding of meaning we lack, though as interest dwindles that loss approaches; it is appreciation of concentration, of a transcendental meaning — in a word, of poetry.<sup>(28/22)</sup>

As I have already noted, Baxter's literary influences in the years of his correspondence with Ginn were not, as a rule, from New Zealand. He thought highly of Basil Dowling and expressed to Ginn the opinion that Dowling's poems 'are often slight but most beautiful, far better than the strained or wishy-washy N.Z.ism often encountered.'<sup>40</sup> He also presented Ginn with one poem in imitation of R.A.K. Mason, but in no way was either poet a mentor. In fact Baxter confided in Ginn his belief that 'WE two hold in our hands the future of N.Z. poetry, which has really not yet pierced ground.'<sup>(28/22)</sup>

Of the numerous poets Baxter read and admired, those that particularly stood out in his estimation were Blake, Hopkins and the younger group of left-wing poets of the 1930s — W.H. Auden, C. Day-Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender — nicknamed the 'Pylon School'. In an early letter he had written: 'I think that Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Day Lewis [*sic*], and even Dylan Thomas or T.S. Eliot, are, if they can forget their mannerisms of modernity and Marxism, real poets.'<sup>(28/2)</sup> He found himself 'Unusually susceptible' to Hopkins and enthused: 'He is great — that is all one can really say, except for reading him again and again. [Hopkins] is like the bread, the water of life to me as far as poetry goes (it goes a long way.) ... The sad-made-strength is [his] forte.'<sup>41</sup> He also cited Auden as a continuing influence upon him, commenting that Auden 'has made better poetry of modern conditions than anyone else I know.'<sup>42</sup>

Apart from the poets that he considered his contempo-

raries, Blake seems to have had the most enduring influence on the young Baxter. It is hardly surprising that this earliest and most marginalised of the romantics would appeal to Baxter in his own situation. He told Ginn that having re-read Blake in the light of criticism of him he could find 'no trace of madness but only the workings of a clear, strong, imaginative mind and faculty ... of poetic expression rarely equalled.'<sup>(28/7)</sup> In a letter written in early May he commented 'Blake is to me pure poetry.'<sup>(28/11)</sup> A sentiment reinforced in his next letter:

I have never yet seen anything to beat Blake's 'Tiger' or even Auden's 'Lay your sleeping head, my love'. Both are 'doom': perhaps I like doom.<sup>43</sup>

In evaluating Baxter's later poetry the fact that he never grew up as part of mainstream New Zealand society cannot, in my opinion, be over-emphasised. As a teenager in a world at war he took pains to assert his Celtic and pacifist heritage and wrote scathingly of 'the obvious sparsity of intelligence among NZers'<sup>(28/7)</sup>, being disappointed that they had taken conscription lying down 'when they could have lead all the satellites of Britain towards neutrality.' He knew that he too faced the prospect of defaulter's detention should he be conscripted, and when he turned eighteen he wrote to the Secretary of the Armed Forces Appeal Board a 'statement in support of my appeal on conscientious grounds.'<sup>44</sup> In it he asserted his belief that 'war in any circumstances is no more justifiable than any other form of murder.' Such views had already earned him and his family a considerable degree of antagonism; a situation in which precocity may well develop as a form of defence. When others did cadet training he weeded gardens. While his nominal peers played cricket and rugby his head was buried in books of poetry. His real peers were imprisoned by the state, and for the majority of his late teens his most significant conversations were by letter.

Given these circumstances, I find it natural that, like Blake's, Baxter's poetic personae take life seriously. His poetry could be ironic, but his marginal status was not conducive to self-irony. Gregory O'Brien, comparing Baxter with our current batch of poets, comments on his lack of a sense of self-irony and of the 'glee' that appears to characterize the way contemporary New Zealand poet's approach their origins.<sup>45</sup> Yet such an approach is predicated substantially on a sense of belonging within a wider community. There is a certain security when others experience life in a similar way to oneself and can empathise with one's experience. Such security is more conducive to developing self-irony. Poetic glee rarely germinates in solitude or under threat of discipline from society. Although Baxter's poetry is not as dour as some paint it, its production demanded strong emotion (although it had to be appropriate emotion). Referring to two of his poems Baxter wrote:

... there is [here], the basic idea that 'love of life', 'joy of living,' is the important foundation of existence. No inertly miserable man has ever written good poetry. But this *joie-de-vivre* is not obtained by consciously looking for it. The po-

ems will tell you more than I can.<sup>(28/13)</sup>

Although he found the poetry of the 'heart-cryers' banal, Baxter admitted to Ginn that 'Like Blake (I think the comparison is fair) I cast my own feelings on the exterior universe.'<sup>(28/27)</sup>

Meditating on the release of Terry and Noel from detention, Baxter wrote:

It will be adults meeting each other, strangers except for the deep discomfort and deep ties of shared experience — for me shared birth. We will slide into some form of community. And perhaps I will see you, whose mind I already know as well as one can know a strange country.<sup>(28/53)</sup>

Through his correspondence with Ginn, the adolescent James K. Baxter offers us glimpses of the complexity of his own mind. As a record of his development as a writer, and of his commitment to poetry, these letters confirm, yet again, the importance of his place in any study of New Zealand literature. Baxter's critique of one of Ginn's poems seems an appropriately reflexive conclusion:

... I have studied your poetry and it yields great richness on study. Whether I like your images or not, whether I believe all your poems as truth or not, you are as you are now a poet and you write fine poetry ....<sup>(28/11)</sup>

Noel Ginn was manpowered to Wanganui following his release from detention. He settled there for some time and turned his attention to horticulture. He has had poetry published in Landfall, and has written for a number of horticultural magazines. He has also written a piece on 'Market Gardening' for School Publications, at Baxter's request. When Ginn was contacted by Frank McKay, in the early 1980s, he was living in Brisbane. He now bases himself in Kerala, Southern India, where he has been writing a book based on his experiences. He was a guest at the James K. Baxter conference, held at Otago University in August.

In preparing this paper I was fortunate to be able to discuss aspects of it with both Noel Ginn and Mrs Jacquie Baxter; their comments were extremely valuable. Thanks also to Mrs Baxter for permission to quote from James K. Baxter's letters to Noel Ginn.

PN

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> James K. Baxter, letter to Noel Ginn, 16 Jan. 1943, James K. Baxter Papers, item 28/6, J.C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington Library. All references to Baxter's correspondence with Ginn are from the '28' series of items in this collection.

<sup>2</sup> James K. Baxter, *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1961) 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> 'Overture to Unbelief' was one of a number of poems that Ginn sent to Baxter in early Dec. 1942. Baxter responded to it in a letter dated 10 Dec. 1942 (item 28/5):

*When I first read 'Overture to Unbelief' I was a little dismayed. When I read it the second time the full force and originality came on me suddenly — like turning a corner and seeing an unexpected view.*

*"On an unloved attic of land where bald hills splash,*

*Erosion-fear feasted in secret mouthfuls*

*Took hold with wide uneven lips like a slug*

*Steadily consumed a continent of assurance"*

*is the stanza most perfect in form and expression.*

*'To climb the stile into the sky' is so simple, so easy — and yet grips one like a steel hawser.*

<sup>4</sup> James K. Baxter, *Collected Poems*, ed. J.E. Weir (Wellington: OUP, 1981) 29.

<sup>5</sup> Item 28/43A. This is only a fragment (final page) but internal evidence suggests a date around December 1944-January 1945.

<sup>6</sup> *The Man on the Horse*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Millicent Baxter, *The Memoirs of Millicent Baxter* (Whatamongo Bay, Queen Charlotte Sound: Cape Catley, 1981) 108.

<sup>8</sup> *The Man on the Horse*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> 18 Mar. 1944, item 28/39.

<sup>10</sup> 25 May 1944, item 28/42.

<sup>11</sup> 16 Jul. 1944, item 28/44.

<sup>12</sup> *The Man on the Horse*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> 11 Sept. 1943, item 28/18. Baxter explains this comment in his subsequent letter dated 2 Oct. 1943, item 28/19:

*When I call you 'intellectual' I think I mean that your poetic attitude corresponds more with that of the 'intellectuals' than that of the 'heart cryers' (who are, be it noted, banal.)*

<sup>14</sup> 20 Nov. 1944, item 28/48.

<sup>15</sup> Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter* (Auckland: OUP, 1990) 75.

<sup>16</sup> 15 Nov. 1943, item 28/24.

<sup>17</sup> 3 June 1944, item 28/43.

<sup>18</sup> 14 July 1945, item 28/54.

<sup>19</sup> Recounted to me in an interview with Noel Ginn, August 1994.

<sup>20</sup> 9 Aug. 1942, item 28/1.

<sup>21</sup> Noel Ginn, letter to Dr. Frank McKay, 24 Mar. 1983, James K. Baxter Papers, Item 10/4/19, J.C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington.

<sup>22</sup> Ginn to McKay, 13 Jan. 1983, item 10/4/17.

<sup>23</sup> 13 Sept. 1944, item 28/46.

<sup>24</sup> Ginn to McKay, 13 Jan. 1983, item 10/4/17.

<sup>25</sup> 12 Feb. 1943, item 28/8.

<sup>26</sup> 4 July 1943, item 28/14.

<sup>27</sup> 4 May 1943, item 28/11.

<sup>28</sup> 9 Apr. 1944, item 28/41.

<sup>29</sup> I presented a paper entitled "'Spark to a Waiting Fuse": Early Influences on the Poetry of James K. Baxter' at the James K. Baxter Conference held at Otago University in August, 1994. This paper discusses the writers Baxter was reading at this time in considerable detail. The proceedings of the conference are to be published by Otago University.

<sup>30</sup> 23 Sept. 1942, item 28/3.

<sup>31</sup> 28 Aug. 1942, item 28/2.

<sup>32</sup> *Collected Poems*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Undated, item 28/15.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Nov. 1943, item 28/22.

<sup>35</sup> 6 Nov. 1943, item 28/23.

<sup>36</sup> 10 Feb. 1944, item 28/33.

<sup>37</sup> 22 Jan. 1943, item 28/7.

<sup>38</sup> 11 Dec. 1945, item 28/55.

<sup>39</sup> 23 June 1945, item 28/53.

<sup>40</sup> 11 Aug. 1943, item 28/16.

<sup>41</sup> 26 Jan. 1944, item 28/31.

<sup>42</sup> 29 Nov. 1943, item 28/27.

<sup>43</sup> 14 June 1943, item 28/12.

<sup>44</sup> James K. Baxter, letter to the Secretary, Armed Forces Appeal Board, undated, item 20/1/2.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory O'Brien, 'After Bathing at Baxter's', *Sport* 11 Nov. (1993): 133-4.