
RICHARD S HILL

In late September this year I came across a manuscript which I had not seen for some four decades. It was a short hand-written essay by James K Baxter, “The Rich and the Poor.” This article traces how the manuscript came into being, and a facsimile is attached as an appendix.

In the winter of 1971 a group of people in or generally associated with the Marxist Labour Group (MLG) resolved to produce a magazine. The MLG had split from the Socialist Action League (SAL) that March, after a significant rift had developed inside the League over various differences on the appropriate ways of applying Trotskyist theory, policy and practice in New Zealand.1 The resignees shared a perception that the League’s leadership was stymying the internal democracy needed to address and resolve those differences, and so there was no choice but to withdraw.2 The MLG milieu felt that the League’s “bureaucratic centrism” had, among other things, permeated and stultified its journal, Socialist Action, making the League incapable of bringing a socialist message to a broad audience.3

After a period of regrouping after the walkouts from the Socialist Action League, then, the MLG agreed to prioritise the production of an accessible and wide-ranging journal which, implicitly or explicitly, explored the interconnections between politics, literature, society, culture and the economy. It would aim to appeal to as broad a readership as possible, something which had been attempted from time to time in the past by various left-wing circles in New Zealand: Tomorrow in the mid-1930s, for example, and in the 1960s by veteran Trotskyist Owen Gager with Dispute, which had run to 19 issues.4 More recently, a journal initiated by the Victoria University of Wellington Socialist Club, Red Spark, had performed this role, appealing to “alienated sectors of society and pos[ing] Marxist solutions in a low key but pervasive manner”. The Socialist Action League had emerged out of some of the currents involved in the Socialist Club, and Red Spark became SAL’s public face. But a process of “bureaucratic ossification” in the League had led, in MLG eyes, to this once “attractive” journal becoming “boring, banal and reportative.” The SAL had, in any case, wound up the magazine in May 1970 in order to focus on Socialist Action, the first issue of which had been published in September 1969.5

The MLG magazine would at first be quarterly, given the group’s small resources. A prototypical issue called Partisan was hastily put together in early Spring 1971 as an indicator of the type of material sought for a magazine that would analyse “contemporary trends” from a Marxian standpoint and avoid the cliched “sermonising that afflicts most self proclaimed Marxist writing” in New Zealand. In this foundational issue, contributions were penned by members of the MLG circle and their acquaintances. Gary R Langford and Rhys Pasley, for example, contributed poetry, and there were articles relevant to debates on racism and women’s liberation, on cinema and capitalism. It is unclear how far this experimental issue was distributed outside MLG circles, although it did have a 25c price on its cover.6

Not long after it was printed, at a time of internal MLG discussions on how best to develop the magazine, James K Baxter called by the legal office of his friend Hector MacNeill. Generally regarded as the first bona fide Trotskyist in New Zealand and certainly the longest serving
Trotskyist in the country at that time, MacNeill knew virtually everyone on the left in Wellington (as well as having extensive national and overseas contacts). Along with a handful of other left-wing lawyers such as Shirley Smith, he spent a great deal of his time defending both protesters and the poor and marginalised.

Baxter asked MacNeill for a favour which flowed from his current preoccupations, which intermingled literary production and socio-political activism. After considerable local opposition to the commune Baxter had established at Jerusalem/Hiruharama, during August and September 1971 its ethos and community had essentially transferred to Wellington. When Baxter turned up in the city he initiated a “crusade on behalf of the homeless young,” calling upon the City Council to “allow communes to occupy old houses in the city centre” at low rents, and campaigning for the repeal of legislation which allowed the police to harass young people without means.

At first Baxter ran his campaign from the family home in Ngaio, to which he had returned in late September, but he soon felt that he “need[ed] a house that will hold thirty people.” At that time a disused dwelling at 26 MacDonald Crescent (between The Terrace and Willis Street) had been commandeered by Vincent Burke to take in former residents of Jerusalem and others “who would have gone to Jerusalem if Jerusalem had been there.” One of a network of experimental transfers of the ideals of Jerusalem into urban spaces, the commune became an intermittent home for Baxter. More of a crash pad rather than a “Baxter community,” it lasted only a few weeks until the City Council evicted the squatters on the ostensible ground that the venue was “unfit for human habitation.” During his stay there (in W H Oliver’s words) the “major tactic in his campaign was Gandhian,” a long fast “living on coffee and lemon juice.”

It was towards the end of that fast that Baxter came to MacNeill’s office to ask his favour. He wanted MacNeill to advocate for a teenager who had been convicted of car conversion. Baxter was worried that the young man would not be able to fulfil the terms of his probation, and would therefore be gaoled. MacNeill readily agreed to do what he could. This work would bring him no income, which was not uncommon in his legal practice (a handful of wealthy clients in effect subsidised those with little or no means of payment), and in this instance the lawyer asked for something in return: a contribution to Partisan. Baxter at once agreed, and returned the next day with a handwritten manuscript, “The Rich and the Poor.”

MacNeill later noted that Baxter referred to the piece on that occasion as “Dives and Lazarus,” the title he had originally intended, a reference to the name often given to a Biblical parable in the Gospel of Luke. Lazarus, a “beggar … full of sores,” had lain at the gate of a “rich man … clothed in purple and fine linen” who feasted “sumptuously every day.” The poor man “desir[ed in vain] to be fed with the crumbs from the rich man’s table.” When they both died, the rich man – often called Dives in the retellings of the parable – found himself in Hell. Seeing Abraham “afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom,” he asked the prophet to “have mercy on me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” Abraham replied that it was not possible as “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed”: “remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.” Nor would Abraham warn the rich man’s five brothers what fate would befall them if they continued to live their lives in the fashion of Dives.

The parable was at the forefront of Baxter’s mind at the time, the focus of his meditation during the fast. MacNeill speculated that the title Baxter had actually placed on the essay, “The Rich
and the Poor,” paid deference to the class-based political thrust of the magazine, with which he was in some sympathy during his stay in Wellington. As he later noted when writing from Jerusalem, in the city his “thoughts [were] Marxist.” When he reverted to “Gandhijian” thoughts in 1972, he recalled that “[a]t times even in this country a Marxist approach has seemed to me the only one that possesses the necessary cutting edge.”

But his engagement with Marxist-based theory and practice lacked depth. It was more of a fleeting encounter that was fuelled by anger and despair at the treatment of the poor by the powerful rather than by any analytical understanding. “Under the cold high stars here at Jerusalem,” he later wrote, “it is not easy to recall the mood of rage and rock-bottom frustration that led me, in the town, to think for several months that I was becoming a Marxist.” The reference to rich and poor in the title of his essay, rather than to class (let alone revolutionary) struggle, was as far as Baxter would go towards organised socialism. Those of us who were putting together the copy for the second Partisan – what was to be its first full launch – always called his piece “Dives and Lazarus” because of the heavily religious nature of its analysis and manifesto.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus was a motif in Baxter’s work over a long period of time. John Weir, for example, selects a passage on “the pain and peace of Lazarus” and “the agony of Dives” for his Essential Baxter compilation. In Baxter’s 1972 prose work “The House of Lazarus,” a young man is picked up by the police for “being out of work and being Maori.” He embodies Lazarus – essentially, all people who are dispossessed and marginalised. Dives is indicted for his lack of concern for, and disinclination to share his riches with, Lazarus. “The house of Lazarus is more beautiful than the house of Dives [because] Lazarus shares” his meagre possessions. Thus “God has blessed Lazarus and withheld his blessing from Dives” – that is, until the rich change their ways.

In “The Rich and the Poor” Baxter writes of the circumstance which had led to the essay, an incident which prefigures that related in “The House of Lazarus.” A 16 year old Maori “friend” was being punished (in the poet’s words to the lawyer, echoed in the essay) for “merely borrowing an iron chariot,” an innocent action that would no doubt lead to dire consequences for the youth. Baxter begins “The Rich and the Poor” by noting that he was writing in the 25th day of his fast, which was to be of 30 days’ duration. Oliver refers to the fast as a 25 day one, so either he made a mistake or Baxter gave up what was intended to be a 30 day fast later on the day the essay was handed over to MacNeill. Whatever the case, the lawyer later recalled that when Baxter came to drop off the manuscript he was in a highly weakened state.

At that time I was handling the literary material for the journal project, perhaps partly because I had co-majored in English (although I had already begun what turned out to be a career focused on history). I was also friendly with Tim Dyce, a fellow member of the History Department at Victoria University who shared Baxter’s views on the benefits of communal living, and MacNeill suggested that this connection might be useful for tracking down the elusive Baxter if we needed to discuss any aspect of “The Rich and the Poor” with him – or, for that matter, if we were to seek further copy for Partisan. While their relationship was sometimes stormy, Baxter and Dyce were friends who worked closely together to foster alternative communities in Wellington.

After I took possession of the manuscript, the Partisan project floundered for various reasons. These were partly financial, but also connected with there being many political issues to work on in the dying days of the National Government – especially efforts to secure policy advances
within the Labour Party in advance of the 1972 election. While the MLG participated fully in “united front” activities within the broad left, moreover, there were also many intra-left struggles in Wellington over both ideology and strategy. The MLG and its circle were intimately involved in these, putting forward a raft of alternative perspectives to those which prevailed in the mainstream socialist left (which was dominated by Stalinist parties aligned with China or the Soviet Union) and in other Trotskyist groupings.23

I departed for the United Kingdom in August 1972, and left the material which I had collected for Partisan with the MLG, in case the group were to revive the idea of producing the same or another politico-cultural magazine.24 With Labour winning the election of 25 November 1972, for the next three years the MLG and its circle focussed on two things. Firstly, working on political and moral issues which had a better chance of making progress under a Labour than a National administration: such matters as improved wages and working conditions, addressing women’s oppression, promoting peace and anti-nuclear issues, advocating for Maori self-determination and anti-racism, examining issues of class struggle, publicising repression in Ulster, fighting for legalised abortion and supporting the campaign for homosexual law reform. Secondly, promoting socialist ideals and activities within a society increasingly aware of “progressive” causes and the interconnections between them. In the course of this work, much time and energy, again, was spent on combatting prevalent ideas within the left – not just those of the Stalinists and rival Trotskyist groups, but also others such as Christian Socialist groupings.25

When I returned to New Zealand in August 1975, then, no new issue of Partisan or any equivalent had appeared, and events once more overtook the idea. On 12 December that year the Labour Government, now headed by Bill Rowling after Norman Kirk’s death, was replaced by Robert Muldoon’s National administration. There was now even more reason to concentrate on political struggle to the exclusion of much else. The MLG circle continued to meet through to the late 1970s, its publishing efforts focussed on socialist tracts and pamphlets advocating a variety of causes.26 All the same, there was always a vague intention that a Partisan-style publication might be revived, and shortly after my return from the United Kingdom some copy was handed over to me, including (once again) the short piece still informally referred to as “Dives and Lazarus.” I do not recall who had held the essay during the 1972-5 period, but when the text came to me it had acquired a handful of annotations: red under-linings of six words, perhaps because they were difficult to read and would need to be printed out before being typed up. One sentence has been altered in the text, but this appears to be in Baxter’s hand and may have been done before the text was delivered to MacNeill.

Most of the MLG and its circle joined the Labour Party in the years after 1975, working in both official party institutions (mostly at branch and electorate level, but also in regional organisations – such as the Wellington Regional Labour Party’s Peace and Justice Forum – and sometimes at national level) and unofficial groupings (such as the Labour Left organisation, established in 1980). As well as work inside the Labour Party, they also continued to spend a great deal of time and energy on united front work on single issues, as well as engaging in intra-left struggles.27

The idea behind Partisan faded away, and “The Rich and the Poor” languished in one of many boxes of material accumulated from various political and social campaigns. Not very long after John Weir’s monumental four-volume James K Baxter: Complete Prose was published, I rediscovered the manuscript in the course of searching out material for the Labour 100 Project, a collaboration between the Labour History Project and the New Zealand Labour Party which
seeks to uncover grassroots archival and other material to mark the centenary of the Labour Party. I was at once struck by contemporary political resonances in “The Rich and the Poor.”

Oliver writes that at the time of Baxter’s fast “he was violently angry, and not only with [his perennial target] the bureaucrats.” The essay indicates, among other things, his despair at those who only gave lip service to their religious beliefs, as well as at the wealthy who refused to share their good fortunes with the poor and the dispossessed. But by early 1972 he had admitted defeat in his campaign to provide for the marginalised by such means as securing “the offer of old houses at a low rental to succour the young,” and he had abandoned most of his socio-political activism (albeit clinging to some of his former aspirations, such as “changing [the] direction” of the “youth revolution”).

When the revival of the Jerusalem community failed Baxter went to Auckland where, weakened by malnutrition, he died of a coronary thrombosis in Auckland on 22 October 1972. One can only speculate as to the extent to which the 25 days of fasting influenced the tone or content of the text of “The Rich and the Poor”. While the themes of the essay resonate with other writings of his “late period,” Baxter also writes in the piece of an altered state of mind – waking from a dream on the day of its composition and being unable “to remember who I am or where I am…. One feels that one might die.” One thing does seem certain: “The Rich and the Poor” affirms John Newton’s assessment that “Baxter’s literary legacy and his social legacy were shoots of the same vine.”
APPENDIX

The Rich and the Poor

I write these notes on the 25th day of my 30-day fast undertaken among other reasons, to meditate in an appropriate manner on the parable of Dives and Lazarus. In Latin, “Dives” simply means rich and this country is the country of Dives because an Asian family could continue a living by use of the food and instead any one of us throws out the door. Yet the poor man Lazarus is present with us. I meet him every day in the streets of Wellington. He bears the marks of heavy handling by the officials of Dives—the reps, the bureaucrats, the managers of factories who organise men to help their peers before they can get to hold a job. It is Lazarus whom I hate because he loves me and so obviously carries the name of God about with him. But it is my job to hate my brother Dives as well. If necessary I will ship him to the shire of his burning house with a rope. Chaff said the rich man who have no living on the poor will land in hell. If my words are sharp and rigorous, you may be able to detect behind them the rhythmic bliss of an ace wrestled on behalf of my neighbour Dives, even if not with his full approval or consent.

Today I lie on the floor of an office, with my head on a coat, and sleep.
In a dream, I am commencing to the New Zealand poet Alan Dineen that one of his poems has a line with which I am not satisfied. Still in the dream, I can't remember the line. I see Alan Dineen too very clearly. I make and answer remarks to whom I am, or whom I am. This is an effect of having been too more than three weeks without food. I feel that one might die. A large minority of people in the world are about the same. It is a state with which Dives is really personally familiar. It is a human state in the Kingdom of Lazarus.

Alongside he steps thus go up to St Mary's church in Devonport. It similarly has cast iron railings, painted green, with sharp points like javelins. This depresses me. The poor of course then feared of has been used by the weather boys for many purposes. It is in fact the basement and laundry of Lazarus, and a occasion his house of medieval mansion. But Dives, who has his own bed room laundry inside the public, has chosen toARRIER.
This is a sign of great spiritual achievement and progress of my own.

In the church, when Dives goes upstairs,了好多 of poor men sit on the steps.
If one of the two, drinking, climbing, chewing cheweberry, or the tailing, should fall and pierce his stomach or intestines, Dives will be to blame for it. The law.

An is about to depart to repay his unavoidable property, the earth with the Lord had provided for the use of all. This tailing is peculiarly dripping, and it is displayed in immediate proximity to the house of God.

I go in to Moses, and hear Christ telling the Pharisees, when we are closely resemble about the judgement of God, and the worth of the poor. He tells them all that not one stone of their magnificent Temple will be left standing.

All the Dives needs is a hole and a water tap and a beam and a and a breaking day to clean up the bedroom and flooring of the poor. He could take out a cup of tea in the morning to Lazarus, who may be suffering from the clay stables. If he stays and sits beside him, brother with brother, the peace of Lazarus will begin to pour into his soul.

4

It is not the agency of Lazarus that it is the world agent. That agency is real enough. But it is not in the main a physical agency terminated by death by starvation, or a mental trauma generation, and he is forced to like the rest of Dives to break his永恒, and his family alive. The agency of Dives is a spiritual agency of Christianity clashing and application, on account of his allowing attachment to material possessions to struggle live for neighbours, gold and community family as well. The theme of the agency is always pressing and tempo. It amounts to none of the harm.

When Dives wakes up from a best dream about the Hell, in which he is preparing himself, a million people know to do for it. They want my property, he finds. They want to fills me. And instead the worth of the poor will our stay of million up his world of power and money. Yet he could store his dream simply enough, by distributing what he did not himself need around among his fellows who are needy. He cannot do this, because he regards his superfluous property as security. And he hates Lazaurus because he is among him, as his terrible living, as the image of men starred and emasculated soul.

The agency of Dives is stood by his wife and son and daughter. His wife like his craftiness for the Bibles, and looks for love as the kind of party where he can be found. His motives him to achieve his business without thanks. He daughter jumps like a leap from the rich house with their gagging and swallows pills right out day in girls pregnancy to one of the Tom of Lazaurus. Lazaurus is one of the followers of his family.
It is like the madness of a dog driven crazy by being restrained by a thousand fleas. The same for it is the acquisition of a spirit of poverty.

But I find the peace of Dories more tenacious than his anger. It is Pi. Lakepeace that comes to a man who dreams that James has Gill to fight his horses and he in his charge.

It is the peace of the growing old. The peace for it is content.

In the police court, I observe the legal order slip is operation. On by on the keen and shrill cry of Longman pass through the virtual bar, receiving men, implying, praying, and moral admonition. The noise of the poor by the sick is restless. It begins when time begins. It will end when time ends.

My friend R—, aged 15, a Morisi, receives probation for care and service. Dories does not share his father's work with Longman. He helps it not alone it at the footside. Led by natural instinct, Longman finds the industrial law open it and shares it with his friends, abnegating it in Flora Victoria. The words the agent of Dories can observe it and return it to him.

R— will very likely be put in a job where he had been to bring the life the boys' care, where he constantly says later he will be sent to jail for breach of probation. I told him like R—, 'Don't 판나 the trial. You're like a millionaire asking to get his second million. Be content with him and clothes, no shoes, not the company of your friends. You will be satisfied, hope for more, be satisfied.'

Yes, if they do, they will not be suppressed by Dories. They will be picked up by the boys in blue or the boys in gray for being poor, for not having a job, for having long drags, maybe for being Morisi. The charges will be laid under the I and J. charge of the Police Officer Act. I know the police stories like a kid would telling the police that it is wrong for him to oppress the poor. This person who is no

Longman remove his belc Dories into guidance? That is what I want to see. But Dories will have to give him at least a few state courts. This needs to make it possible.

James R. Jones
The Marxist Labour Group’s name hinted at the overseas grouping to which it was closest, the United Kingdom’s International Marxist Group (whose most prominent member was Tariq Ali), and at the group’s intention to forge a relationship with the New Zealand Labour Party.


The “degeneration” within SAL was seen to have occurred from August 1970: “Application for Formal Recognition by the Fourth International of the Marxist Labour Group of New Zealand,” January 1974, 1. This and other documents and pamphlets cited in this article are from my private collection held at Victoria University of Wellington, unless otherwise specified.


Partisan, (Spring 1971), 2 and passim.


McKay, 271-72; see too Oliver, 145.

Newton, 153-54; McKay, 271-72.


Oliver, 143. Baxter moved on to another community in McFarlane Street before returning to Jerusalem in February 1972: McKay, 272.

See the Appendix for a slightly reduced reproduction, published with the kind permission of the James K. Baxter Trust.


Complete Prose, III, 417, 419.

Complete Prose, III, 471.


Complete Prose, III, 454. See too James K Baxter, Autumn Testament (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1972), 9: “My friend Tom is picked up by the police on an Auckland street for the double crime of being out of work and being Maori.”


Oliver, 144.

“Application for Formal Recognition,” 2.

Plans for “a rebirth of the conception behind the magazine,” for example, were afoot in early 1974: “Application for Formal Recognition,” 2.
Documents, pamphlets, etc., in my own collection cover a huge range of interests, activities and causes, nationally and internationally, within the left in Wellington and elsewhere in the country.

When the MLG lost out to the SAL in its bid to be the New Zealand section of the Fourth International (United Secretariat), its influence among other left groupings diminished (Crawford, “Review,” 19). It vigorously took issue with both Stalinist parties and the SAL on foreign policy issues; see, for example, An Enquiry into Aggression in Angola: Soviet & Cuban or U.S. & South African (May 1977) and Socialist Action League Issues Debate Challenge But Runs for Cover When It Is Accepted (July 1977). The MLG worked, however, in united fronts with groups ranging from Bill Logan’s and Adaire Hannah’s Spartacist League (a Trotskyist group which had split from Owen Gager in 1972) through to activist Christian groupings of various types.

Peace and Justice Forum, Labour Left and other papers, Richard Hill collection, Victoria University.


Oliver, pp. 144-45.

Oliver, 152.


Newton, 169.