

Complete Poems

By James K Baxter, edited and introduced by John Weir, 4 volumes.

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Reviewed by Geoffrey Miles

Fifty years after James K. Baxter's death, we finally have an edition of his *Complete Poems*. This four-volume collection completes the heroic project of editor John Weir and Te Herenga Waka University Press, begun in *Complete Prose* (2015) and *Letters of a Poet* (2018), to collect together and publish in scholarly form all of Baxter's scattered writings. The publisher's blurb reaches for an appropriately Baxterian image in calling this a 'Herculean task'. Indeed, the scale of the collection invites superheroic imagery: 2,977 poems in 3,155 pages – to say nothing of the appendices (and I will say something of the appendices later). Weir's earlier, long-standard *Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press, 1980) ran to only 656 pages. Gathering in the unpublished contents of the manuscript notebooks in the Hocken Library, together with poems published in obscure journals or recovered from friends and acquaintances, his new edition more or less triples the quantity of Baxter's poetry now accessible to scholars and the general reader.

The edition is impressive not only in scale but also in detail. Weir has done a meticulous job in sorting out the chronology of the poems and charting the relationships between 'drafts' and 'variants' of the same poems. He is skilful in deciphering Baxter's sometimes fiendishly illegible handwriting, and disentangling the tangles of crossed-out and scribbled-in revisions especially in the later notebooks.¹ I was critical of Weir's choice in the *Complete Prose* to relegate all explanatory material to a separate fourth volume, meaning that in order to find out even such basic information as the title and author of a book Baxter was reviewing one had to keep two heavy volumes open simultaneously. In this edition Weir follows the same policy, but in dealing with the poetry I think his choice to provide 'a clear reading page unencumbered by editorial notes' (4.xxxv) was the right one.

Weir's annotation policy is quite parsimonious. He normally limits himself to information about source, dating, and textual issues, offering explanatory material only when it was supplied by Baxter himself or (occasionally) one of his close associates. This is at times a bit frustrating. It would be nice to be told what 'Alcmanian couplets' are (poem 141), or who Seumas a Glinnhe was (602), or who was the 'Chapman' addressed in 'Letter to Australia' (1471), or to be reminded of the identities of one-time New Zealand notables such as 'Dr Geering' and 'Canon Montefiore' in 'Thoughts on Ecumemism' (2443). It might have been useful to the reader to note that 'The Two Birds' (1274) is a pastiche of the Scots ballad 'Twa Corbies', or that 'Hurrah, she cried, and waved her wooden leg' ('Song for a Psychiatrist's Birthday', 1471) was an early twentieth-century catch-phrase. But once one starts annotating an encyclopedic poet like Baxter there is no obvious place to stop, and – given the scale of the project as it stands – it seems a quite justifiable decision for Weir to stick to the bibliographic record and leave further commentary to later scholars.

In *The Snake-Haired Muse: James K. Baxter and Classical Myth* (2011 – a book which, oddly, doesn't appear in Weir's extensive bibliography), Paul Millar, John Davidson and I undertook one of the first surveys of all Baxter's poetry, published and unpublished. In the introduction I fancifully suggested that it was tempting to mythologise the contents of the unpublished notebooks using some of Baxter's characteristic images: 'an underworld, a textual unconscious, a cellblock in the basement of the *Collected Poems*'. Now that Weir, Hercules-like, has

penetrated the underworld and opened up the cells, how does it change our view of Baxter as a poet?

The most obvious impact is to bring home the sheer scale of Baxter's poetic production. From his first poem composed at the age of seven, to the 'Ode to Auckland' written a few days before his death, he produced almost daily, as Weir says, a 'great stream ... of poetry' (4.29). Hostile critics might suggest that the last thing the world needs is more Baxter poems – and in some moods at least Baxter would have agreed. Weir quotes (4.18) his comment in the preface to *The Rock Woman*, that in preparing that collection 'I have had to go through twenty-seven unedifying manuscript books, and was struck by the evidence they provided of an obsessive industry that led me as often as not into the cactus.' But despite Baxter's self-deprecation, there is new poetry in this collection which is entirely worthy to stand beside his published work, and as a whole it provides a fascinating study of his development.

The greatest volume of new material comprises Baxter's juvenilia. Whereas the 1980 *Collected Poems* contained only 47 poems written up to 1945 (Baxter's nineteenth year), the first volume of this edition contains 989. While this means that the edition is front-loaded with its weakest material, it also gives us a close-up view of the creation of a major poet. The *Complete Poems* paradoxically demonstrates two things at once: how much Baxter changed as a poet throughout his career, and how little he changed. In terms of style and technique, there is an almost unrecognisable gap between the wispy Romantic lyricism of the earliest poems and the tough, stripped-down colloquial vigour of the Jerusalem period. Nevertheless, reading through this early material, one is struck by the presence of themes and concerns that remain central to Baxter's work throughout his life: nature, death, spirituality (a broad Romantic pantheism at this point, rather than Catholic Christianity), the power and sacredness of poetry, hatred of war and social injustice (the power of 'Mammon' and 'Caesar'), and, emerging in adolescence, the power of sexual desire and sexual guilt. Baxter's achievement is to keep mining these same seams throughout his career with an extraordinary inventiveness in his range of styles, tones, and approaches.

In this light, one of the most valuable aspects of the *Collected Poems* is Weir's carefully judged identification of 'drafts' and 'variants'. It allows us to track Baxter's constant reworking of material, creating new versions of poems which sometimes end up dramatically different from the originals. For instance, the 1944 poem 'Bird-Invocation' (*sic*, 744), a jokey love poem with a *carpe diem* moral ('Birds mate, and shall not we?'), is metamorphosed in the 1950 'Bird Invocation' (1224) into a tender blessing for his infant daughter. A particularly interesting case is the poem 'The Sealion', which went through four versions between 1942 and 1965. It has its root in the teenage Baxter's encounter with an aged and sick sealion on an Otago beach, tormented by dogs and visitors with 'stone and stick'. His first response (178) is an engagingly earnest protest against human cruelty: 'So men can careless see a creature die, / And feel no qualm at shedding guiltless blood.' The second version (1232), in 1950, self-consciously identifies the suffering animal with the poet: the sealion is a creature out of its element – '*So you, without your verse.*' The third (1350), in 1952, raises 'the grey anarchic seabeast' to a kind of Blakean mythic stature: 'unwieldy, fetid, clown and hobo' on land, it is at sea 'the priest / Of Delphic mystery' who 'has seen Earth's secret fountains and the chambers of the East.' The final published version (2345) strips away mythic flourishes (apart from the single phrase 'Poseidon's dying child') and explicit commentary, to give us simply a vivid image ('The monster / had the thick neck of an old / business man, each wrinkle filled / with salt scurf. He stank') and leave the reader's response open. Over 23 years Baxter kept returning to this memorable and painful image, reworking it in varied styles and drawing very different

significances out of it, before finally finding a version which satisfied him. It is one of many examples in this edition of the coexistence in Baxter of obsessive repetition and flamboyant variation.

One complication in tracing the development of Baxter's work is the editor's decision to relegate his 'Bawdy and Obscene Poems' to an appendix, incongruously juxtaposed with his 'Poems for Children'. One is reminded of Byron's comment in *Don Juan* about the treatment of dirty classical poems in school editions: 'They only add them all in an appendix, / Which saves, in fact, the trouble of an index.' Weir declares sternly that these poems 'were meant to be funny, but they are not' (4.17). I would respectfully disagree, at least with reference to some of the poems, which follow in the tradition of Baxter's great role model Robert Burns. To cut them off from the main 'stream' of Baxter's work diminishes our sense of his variety and multifariousness. It makes it harder to spot such intriguing juxtapositions as the reference to 'the Adonis-yoke of lust and pride' in 'A Poem to Read before Sleep' (645), just a couple of pages in Baxter's notebook before a bawdily comic allusion to Adonis in 'Ballad of the Venus Man-o'-War'.

Of course, many readers will agree with Weir's disapproval, if not necessarily for quite his reasons. Baxter's treatment of sexuality and his view of women have always been stumbling-blocks for many of the admirers of his verse, all the more so since the revelation about marital rape in the 2018 *Letters*. It is a sad irony that this monumental and long-awaited edition has appeared at a point when Baxter's public reputation is probably at its lowest point ever – for entirely understandable reasons, however much Baxter's admirers may regret it.

In a broader sense, Baxter is perhaps a poet who feels out of step with New Zealand in the early 21st century. He was shaped, and consciously shaped himself, in the model of the Romantic Poet (capital letter deliberate): the tormented genius, divinely inspired, self-scourging and self-destructive, both a suffering private individual and a public voice against oppression and injustice, a figure who talks to and sometimes for God. It is a conception of the poet which always felt at odds with the Kiwi cult of modest unpretentiousness (one recalls Iain Sharp's jibe, 'Aw, for Gawd's sake, get off your high horse, Jimmy'), and today is fatally associated with the Great Dead White Men tradition of English literature. But there are other aspects of Baxter which feel much more contemporary: his passion against social injustice and the emptiness of the consumer society, his green environmentalism, his bicultural identification with te ao Māori, the wry self-deprecating humour which always ran alongside his grandiloquence. It is to be hoped that this magnificent edition will, in time, help to bring Baxter back to his proper place in the literature of Aotearoa.

¹ A few errors which I noticed in passing, for the record. In 'Alphabeta' (poem 117) 'xebec' should be 'xebec'. 'Bird-Envocation' is 'neo-Skeltonian' (an imitation of John Skelton) not 'Sheltonian' (note to poem 745). In 'Love' (2061), I think Baxter's final version was 'till the bunfight ends', not just 'till the bunfight'. More importantly (since it's a reference to one of Baxter's favourite classical images), the final words of 'Letter to Bob Lowry' (1535) should be 'to bend Ulysses' bow', not 'blow'.