

‘He Waiata o Hemi’: An Unpublished Poem by James K. Baxter

Peter Whiteford

It has long been recognized that the *Collected Poems* of James K. Baxter gathers together only a portion of what he wrote: James Bertram estimated ‘about a quarter’ (Manhire 102), but the evidence of Baxter’s manuscripts suggests this may be somewhat conservative, as Paul Millar’s introduction to the recent re-issue of *Beyond the Palisade* makes clear. An equally telling reminder is provided by Millar’s edition of *Cold Spring* (1996), the volume which was to have been Baxter’s second collection, but which was ultimately rejected by Caxton’s editor, Lawrence Baigent. This note presents another hitherto unpublished poem, one of which it appears Baxter kept no other copy, and provides something of its context.¹

By November of 1970, the community developing at Jerusalem had grown beyond the capacity of the small house which Baxter was using by favour of the Sisters of Compassion, and the group was obliged to move to larger premises made available by local Maori. Unable to finance the move from his own meagre resources, Baxter wrote (on the 10th of the month) to the then Archbishop of Wellington, Cardinal McKeefry, asking for a small, short-term loan to enable them to establish electrical and water supplies. It is not possible to reproduce the letter here, but it provides a valuable insight into how Baxter represented the Jerusalem community. He is clearly aware of its ambiguous reputation, and goes to some effort to describe what he sees as the positive social and spiritual fruits of community living. No doubt he is all too conscious of his reader, but his letter offers some confirmation of the view McKay presents of a community that avoids drugs and promiscuity, and that lives by sharing goods and by communal work (255ff).

McKeefry replied within a week, welcoming and applauding the work Baxter was doing on behalf of ‘nga raukore, the poor of God’ (the phrase, of course, is Baxter’s, not that of the Cardinal), and he was clearly supportive of the endeavour. He describes himself as ‘deeply moved’ by Baxter’s account, and continues:

This is a most important work that you are seeking to do, and by working in your own way, but with complete trust in God, you are achieving results. In other parts of the world there are people similarly dedicated drawing their inspiration from their own membership in the

Church but working outside its ambit in reclaiming souls for God. It is the value of the souls that counts...'

The letter enclosed a cheque for slightly more than Baxter had requested. 'I imagine', wrote the Cardinal, 'that there could be unexpected difficulties in doing these works, and it is better for you to know that you have some reserve to meet the unexpected problems.'

He accepted Baxter's assurance that the money would be repaid, but insisted 'you are not to be over-concerned about a time limit or repayment. The main thing is for you to be able to continue this work tranquil in mind and free from undue worry. You will have enough worries through human beings and they will be a severe testing for yourself.'

Baxter's response to McKeefry's support was another letter, this time in the form of a poem, but concluding with much the same farewell as the earlier letter had done, with an acknowledgement of spiritual childhood.

Written in Baxter's own hand, the poem is preserved in a single copy in the Wellington Archdiocesan Archives, together with the letters referred to here. It is reproduced here exactly as Baxter set it down – the parenthetical glosses are the poet's own.

He Waiata o Hemi

I came to Hiruharama	(Jerusalem)
With a leather coat;	
Now the coat is cloth	(your gift/loan)
but the cuffs are still leather.	(voluntary poverty)

Kua timata te mahi –
 The work has begun.
 There are beans growing
 And Karl planted them;
 There are pumpkins growing
 And Heto dug the ground;
 There are eels in the pot
 And Peter caught them – Yes,
 Kua timata te mahi–
 The work has begun.

Ka whakaiti taku mana,
 Ka whakanui te aroha –
 As I shrink down to death
 The love will grow greater.
 The old kumara has to rot
 For the young ones to get life –

When the hangi is ready (feast)
 They dig them out of the ground,
 The young ones red and strong,
 but the old one is pulpy –
 They throw him over the fence
 With mildew round his neck. (kenosis)

He parapara iti,
 The little seed in the ground
 The all-but-nothing thing –
 The soul that sleeps naked
 In the arms of Te Atua – (God)
 No good at all if the seed
 Was wrapped in cellophane. (no possessions)

Because our God is dark
 The blindness does not matter –
 Because our God is silent
 The deaf man gets no blame.

What can I do in the morning?
 I can put on my coat;
 I can make a cup of coffee;
 And light a cigarette;
 I can kneel down like a camel
 On the grass beside the fence;
 I can eat and walk and sleep;
 I can pray for those I love –
 Ko te aroha, i te Ariki –
 When we love, it is the Lord –
 And this dead man is permitted
 To give with empty hands.

When we share our fags and blankets
 Christ begins to shine –
 Our flesh becomes the bread;
 Our blood becomes the wine –
 I am cowshit in the garden
 So that the crops can grow –
 Ko Ihu taku wai,
 The Lord is my drink –
 Ko Ihu taku kai,
 The Lord is my food –
 Ko Ihu taku moni,
 The lord is my bank account –
 Ko Ihu taku mana,
 The Lord is my good name –
 Ko Ihu taku aroha,
 The Lord is my heart –

Ko Ihu taku mate,
The Lord is my death pain.

To be a dead goat
That the flies gather on –
The sun in his mercy
Can make the teeth shine.
Even our sins are His
Let the new pain begin.

(He 'became sin' for us)

Arohanui, e pa.

Hemi

The poem is typical of much of the Jerusalem verse in its controlled handling of speech rhythms, its occasional rhetorical elevation of such rhythms, its assured colloquialisms, its forceful natural imagery, and its relaxed movement between two languages.

Equally, 'He Waiata o Hemi' is important for what it reveals about Baxter's intentions, desires and achievements with regard to Jerusalem, and for the insights it provides into the spiritual dimension of the Jerusalem experience.

WORKS CITED

Baxter, James K. *Collected Poems*. Ed. John E. Weir. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1981.

Baxter, James K. *Cold Spring*. Ed. Paul Millar. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Baxter, James K. *Beyond the Palisade*. Ed. Paul Millar. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Manhire, Bill. 'Events and Editorials: Baxter's Collected Poems.' *Islands* 31-32 (1981):102-120.

McKay, Frank. *The Life of James K. Baxter*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1990.

McKeefry, Peter. Letter to James K. Baxter. 16 November 1970. Roman Catholic Archdiocesan Archives, Wellington.

Note

-
- ¹ I am grateful to Mrs J. C. Baxter for permission to print 'He Waiata o Hemi'; I am also grateful to Cardinal Williams for permission to quote from Cardinal McKeefry's letter, and for allowing me access to the Archdiocesan Archive.