

Spark to a Waiting Fuse.

Reviewed by Peter Whiteford.

Spark to a Waiting Fuse. James K. Baxter's Correspondence with Noel Ginn, 1942-1946.

Ed. Paul Millar.

Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2001.

As the editor of this volume justly remarks, the poet James K. Baxter captured the imagination of his compatriots as no other New Zealand writer has done. When he died in 1972, Wellington's daily newspaper, *The Dominion*, announced the fact to its readers with a large billboard that simply declared him as 'friend.' Not all of those readers would have agreed, not in 1972, and certainly not in earlier years, when Baxter's own agenda had more to do with being a strident critic of society – the self-appointed and self-proclaimed 'sore thumb of the tribe' – rather than a benevolent friend to all. Moreover, since his death, Baxter has remained a controversial figure, whose stature and influence as a poet continue to be the source of considerable debate and ongoing publication. *Spark to a Waiting Fuse* makes an important contribution to that debate, adding immeasurably to our knowledge of Baxter's formative thinking and growth as a poet. Indeed, the volume might well have been subtitled 'The Growth of a Poet's Mind.'

It is a striking feature of Baxter's verse how many poems are constructed as letters – to Colin Durning, to John Weir, to Frank McKay, to Peter Olds, to Maurice Shadbolt, even to Piers Plowman, to Australia, and to the world; and to Noel Ginn. It might have been thought that the two verse letters to Ginn belonged with the others as evidence of Baxter's fondness for a particular verse style, but, as Paul Millar remarks, these two poems represent a substantial private correspondence. Drawing on previously unpublished archival material in the Hocken Library, and the papers of the late Frank McKay, Baxter's biographer (deposited in the Victoria University Library), Millar presents here a sequence of letters written by Baxter to his slightly older friend, Noel Ginn. The letters are accompanied by Ginn's letters to Baxter, and by over 200 poems that Baxter wrote at the same time, many of which have not previously been published, poems that Baxter often sent to Ginn and discussed with him.

Millar's lengthy introduction provides a wealth of background material – about Baxter, his brother Terence, their family, and of course about Noel Ginn. There is much here that richly complements McKay's biography, and allows us a much fuller understanding of Baxter's adolescence. At the same

time, there is an equally fascinating story to be told about Ginn, and the pacifist movement in New Zealand during the Second World War. Both Noel Ginn and Terence Baxter were conscientious objectors, and both in due course were sent to the Hautu detention camp. In the course of their friendship, Terence noticed Ginn reading and writing poetry; he told him of his younger brother, Jim, who was also keen on writing poetry, and through Terence's intervention, the two began to correspond.

The book begins with an astutely chosen quotation from a review Baxter wrote for the *New Zealand Listener* of the *Letters of William Wordsworth*. In it, Baxter observed that we look to find in the letters of a poet something of the 'circumstantial scaffolding' of the poetry. The metaphor may be a little inaccurate, but we well appreciate what Baxter means; and so we look to his own letters (no others have yet been published) to find ways into the verse, to show us what was in the poet's mind at the time, and even on occasions to have the benefit of the poet's own gloss on his work. Hardened followers of Roland Barthes will no doubt disdain such access to authorial meaning, but most readers welcome the opportunity to consider a writer's contemporaneous expressions as some indication of what may be found in a poem.

Beyond that, the introduction provides a detailed account of some of the major influences in Baxter's childhood and adolescence, a scholarly overview of Baxter's early manuscript books, and then extended discussions of what Millar distinguishes as the three early phases of Baxter's writing –juvenile, adolescent, and early adult. Millar concedes the difficulty of assigning terminal dates to any such concepts (and indeed, the adolescent phase seems remarkably short: one thinks of Baxter the man as having a rather extended adolescence) but nevertheless they are very useful markers of Baxter's poetic development, and of his own reflection on that development.

For one of the clearest things to emerge from this book is the extraordinary sense of vocation with which Baxter began writing. Time after time, his letters show how conscious he is of what he is doing and what he is trying to do as a poet. Equally, they confirm the precocity that has always been associated with Baxter, right from the time Allen Curnow included some of Baxter's early verse in his Caxton anthology.

The work is an exemplary piece of textual scholarship; the annotations are judicious and informative, the bibliography and indexing provide excellent guides to the reader, and the editing of the letters is done with consistent care. In addition, the publisher is to be congratulated for the appearance of the book; the inclusion of Baxter's small sketches gives a delightful flavour to the whole.

No doubt James K. Baxter will continue to hold a special place in New Zealand letters. His work is not universally admired – to some degree he is a victim of changing fashions (both literary fashions, and what might be called fashions of cultural politics) – but it continues to be read, and to feature as a kind of brooding presence in the landscape we call New Zealand poetry. This admirable work allows us to inspect more closely some of the influences that made that presence what it is.