



James K. Baxter
EL JESÚS MAORÍ Y OTROS POEMAS
Traducción, prólogo y notas de Caleb Harris
Lobo Blanco Editores, 2018, 97pp

Caleb Harris, journalist, writer, translator and fireman currently living in Wellington, has undertaken the very difficult task of bringing James K. Baxter's work to Spanish-speaking readers, quite possibly for the first time ever. "El Jesús Maorí y otros poemas", published in Colombia by Lobo Blanco Editores in 2018, is an anthology of 21 poems by Baxter: we have Baxter in different periods of his life, exploring and grappling with multiple issues that shape his vision of life. There is Baxter in his travels around Asia; Baxter as pacifist, activist, Baxter exploring religion, nature, social justice, daily life. Different dimensions to offer readers, probably unfamiliar with Baxter, a glimpse into the life of this giant figure in New Zealand literature.

Harris' approach to the translation task is an optimistic one. He acknowledges that translating can be an ungrateful exercise, but describes the process involved in translating Baxter as amazing and rewarding. In addition, he refers to translation as a means to come closer to an original language to which vernacular languages can only allude to. This view echoes those by Augustine of Hippo, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, among others. The fact that languages are related to each other, this fundamental a priori relationship stemming from what languages want to say, rather than from what is or has been said, is what enables the process of translation.

Harris' work is careful and rendered in an elegant, polished style. The variety of Spanish is predominantly the standard one, with a few sprinkles of Colombian dialect. In "El Lamento del Artillero" (The Gunner's Lament), the end result is an interesting Baxter doppelgänger and gunner with a certain tropical flair (perhaps donning military fatigues and smoking cigars) who speaks about how he was sent "enguayabado" (with a hangover) across the Tasman Sea on the way to Vietnam.

His approach to the translation task has elements of foreignisation. Maori terms kept from the original force the readers on a journey into the, in their eyes, exotic world of Aotearoa. This journey is facilitated through a section which includes a glossary, plus notes which offer cultural background to certain elements of the poems which would be otherwise undiscernible to readers outside of New Zealand. "I have walked barefoot from the tail of the fish to the nose" is explained accordingly as travels around the North Island. No explanation, however, is offered for "labyrinthine hives" of Wellington, where "power breeds on power". Furthermore, readers of this translation would probably not grasp the enormity of the miracle performed by a Maori Jesus if he were to command in Wellington that "From now on the sun will shine."

Baxter remains a complex and challenging man. He is frequently acknowledged as New Zealand's most accomplished poet, a tremendously influential figure, sometimes referred to as a prophet. However, in the past few months there have been some disturbing revelations



involving criminal behaviour by Baxter. Were he still alive today, Baxter would be facing serious accusations of rape. Of course, Caleb Harris cannot be faulted for not mentioning this in the prologue, as these accusations have surfaced after this anthology was published.

It is possible to imagine Baxter as feeling ideologically close and embracing many of the movements and struggles stemming from Latin America in the 1960's and 1970's. It is also possible to imagine that many of leaders of these Latin American movements would have felt a strong connection to the powerful dimension of social justice in Baxter's poetry. This anthology represents in that regard a long overdue bridge between two distant and seemingly different, yet fairly similar worlds.

Mauricio López Langenbach

