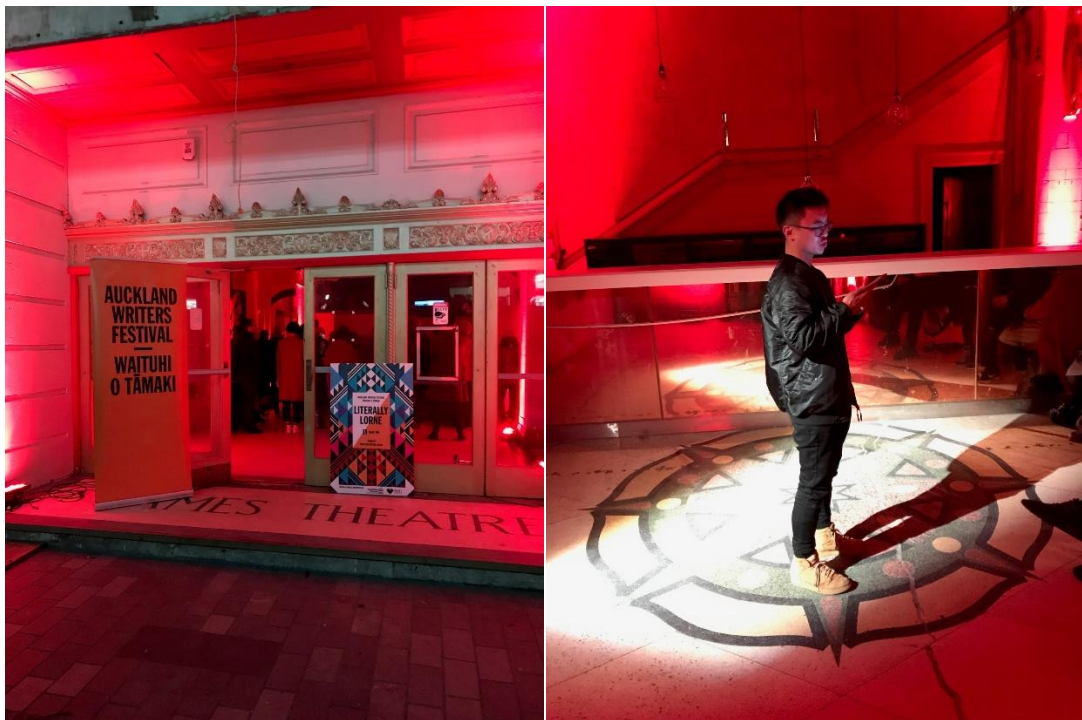


AUCKLAND WRITERS FESTIVAL WAITUHI O TĀMAKI 2019

DEAR JIM, **ST JAMES THEATRE, LITERALLY LORNE**



From the grand lobby of the prestigious old St James Theatre, eight writers responded to the recently published and sometimes shocking letters of the legendary James K Baxter, each had chosen one of Baxter's letters to be read aloud by actor Bruce Hopkins before they responded with *Dear Jim...* replies, live and direct from the 21st century. A selection of those letters and responses appears here.

Featuring Emma Espiner, Jeffrey Paparoa Holman, Kirsty Gunn, Nathan Joe, Ian Wedde and Annabel Wilson.

Thanks to Victoria University Press for permission to publish the following letters from *James K Baxter: Letters of a Poet*, edited by John Weir.

To Phyl Ferrabee, Hamilton

14 October 1959

Dear Phyl,

... There is something in you (v. rare, very few women possess it) which prevents you from using all the instruments of pain on someone else when that someone else lays themselves open, shows their weakness – I mean, you actually are interested in something more than the tabulation of the wounds you have received & the filling in of a charge sheet – it is more than ‘giving’, it is ‘giving in spite of being hurt’ – many lay claim to it, especially in Christian circles, I think you actually have it. That is my bouquet to you, my dear, a clumsy one, but the best bower in the garden ...

... Portrait of Jacquie. Middle height. 33 years old. Half-Maori, Melanesian not Polynesian, boyish figure still (I like it), thick dark half-fuzzy hair which is a despair to her & will not lie at on her forehead. Dominant virtue: straightness, Dominant vice: anger. Adopted at 2 by European parents. Mother had died when she was 10 days old. Looks on foster-parents as actual parents (in feeling); but the ‘Maori stratum’ is a second self underneath her almost Girl Guide daylight self. On 2 memorable occasions in the past 12 years it emerged in the bedroom & delighted me. Generally it shows itself by a ruthless, implacable anger towards anyone or anything that disturbs or injures her. And in an inconsolable grief, a sense that she is alone in the dark and no one cares. Not beautiful at all; but a soft lovely voice when she is not angry. Has regular spells of acute anxiety, showing itself in exhaustion & physical rigidity & impaired circulation. Extremely, even obsessively hard-working: will be completely preoccupied for a month with some project of homebuilding & talk of nothing else. Intensely jealous of my male or female friends, A.A. members, R.C.s, anyone. Her well-developed radar would tell her in 10 seconds subconsciously, if she met you, Phyl, that we are something more than good friends. She would hate your guts for ever – and show it by an almost solicitous politeness. She never forgives even the smallest injury. Always has disliked being touched – by me or anyone – kissing or arm-round-the-waist irritate & embarrass her. Her reaction to any sign of sexual aggression on my part is – ‘You want to hurt me, don’t you?’ Strict & irritable with the kids, especially with Hilary (aged 10), whom she regards as ‘self-indulgent’ – Hilary is very like me. Jacquie is at heart a Spartan & I an Athenian. I think she would have liked a brave, active, courteous, warrior husband: a good business man, a keen digger of the garden, cheerful, with senses controlled to the point of atrophy, never cracking a coarse joke, whose shoulder she could cry on now & then without any fear that he would want to steer her into the bedroom. A modern St Joseph. I took him as my patron when I became a Catholic; and have a fair hope of fulfilling her expectations before I am 80. I love Jacquie; not always like, but love. Once I could not bear her coldness, or the virulence of her angers. But these natural qualities in her were increased a hundredfold by my drinking and infidelities – they have decreased somewhat already in calmer weather. I don’t blame myself half as much as I used to. Each of us has suffered acutely from the other’s temperament. Her position of distance may well have a healing effect. She has X-ray eyes; knows my faults to the bone, and never hesitates to tell me them – if one can take it, that situation can be a good one.

So I maunder on – always about J.K.B. Some day I hope I get tired of the subject ...

EMMA ESPINER’S RESPONSE:

Dear Jim,

I love the word indigenous so much it makes my eyes water.

I whisper it to myself with a capital I, even though the part of me that was born of colonisers is a grammar pedant who insists that the inappropriate use of capital letters is a sin.

Your wife was an indigenous woman who wanted to become a doctor. A bold plan, for a Māori woman, in 1946. Despite earning good grades, she was denied entry to the only medical school in the country.

I think about Jacquie a lot.

I fell in love with my husband, and with poetry, because of you and Jacquie.

He waiata mō Te Kare, taken out of context, is a beautiful, haunting declaration of love and fidelity.

'Up here at the wharepuni, the star at the kitchen window mentions your name to me ...Taku ngakau ki a koe'.

Ten years ago, in 2009, I walked the streets of Wellington for weeks in a daze, hearing his voice and your words.

I even named the fucking cat after you.

In 2019, context is where it's at Jim and I'm thinking about narcissists. My friend tells me the severity of this affliction can be signalled by the use of lowercase or capital N. I suspect your N would stand, erect on a McCahon landscape. I AM.

I looked up the signs and symptoms of a narcissistic personality disorder - like Jacquie, I plan to become a doctor.

I read that narcissists have an unwillingness to recognise the needs and feelings of others. That, despite harbouring secret feelings of insecurity, shame, vulnerability, they lash out with rage and contempt and try to belittle and manipulate others.

There's no advice about seeking treatment because a hallmark of this disorder is refusing to believe that anything is wrong with you.

Then I found a letter from a friend of yours about a medical student who had 'gone off the rails on booze and pills and went absolutely nuts' and tried to stab you, Jim. Funny old world isn't it.

Your mum was at fault, too. Of course. You said you did not feel loved by your mother as a child. So it's her fault, your relentless pursuit of sex at any cost.

You felt entitled to a body that was not yours.

You felt entitled to a whakapapa that was not yours.

You took and took and it wasn't even that you were amazing with it.

You were boring. You were a sex addict before it was cool and a tedious conversationalist, an asshole to your friends. Nobody even tried to hide the fact that you talked for the sole purpose of hearing your voice ricochet off someone else's presence.

You said she was ugly and you said it to other women so that they would sleep with you.

And bell hooks said: 'Think of all the women you know who will not allow themselves to be seen without makeup. I often wonder how they feel about themselves at night when they are climbing into bed with intimate partners. Are they overwhelmed with secret shame that someone sees them as they really are? Or do they sleep with rage that who they really are can be celebrated or cared for only in secret?'

This is for Jacquie. I believe she slept with rage.

~~~~~

**To David Chalmers, Dunedin**

16 July 1972

Dear David Chalmers,

*I will be leaving Jerusalem on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month to go to Christchurch.*

*It would be best then if you send tickets –*

*c/o John Weir, ~~11~~<sup>11</sup>English Department, Canterbury University.*

*I will come from ChCh to Dunedin on the 29<sup>th</sup>. This will save you money. But if you want to put in more for my travelling expenses, that is O.K. by me.*

*Praise the Lord! These days He is giving me springtime after winter. I will stay in Dunedin for a day or two.*

*All good wishes,*

*Yours James K. Baxter*

**To Jacquie Baxter, Wellington**

[Undated. July 1972]

*My love,*

*This mat and feather duster were a gift to me from a Samoan Presbyterian pastor in Christchurch. I would like you to have them.*

*Arohanui*

*Hemi*

**JEFFREY PAPAROA HOLMAN'S RESPONSE:**

*On looking again into Heemi's Collected Poems  
(for Roger Steele)*

Jim, you know the score I'm sure: 4am on the beach  
in a dream, it's dark and he shines a light in your

face, this stranger you still can't see in the black  
that's as thick and as wild as octopus ink, the arm

on the throat and he says, "Do you cut?" Waking afloat

in the paranoid state of a day before that was honed

in the light, media beat-ups of rugby coaches, rapes by  
the line that went unreported – man, you must feel at

home in the clouds, wise as an angel predicting my lines.

Like a drunk to the Bar with a hound on my heels, I sat

on a stool and I opened your book: life jumped out with  
a curse on her lips, pursued by death full of glee, like

a fan, high as a kite when the whistle blows and  
fifteen men hang their heads over mud. Pages of

anarchy tooled into lines that mimic the heartbeat  
pumping the nation: the sound and smell of a priest

caught farting, hearing confession from an alkie  
barman and over the radio, racing voices, the saw-tooth

judges who ruled the Fifties. Under the bed the springs  
go creaking, a Glenn Colquhoun, a freak in the making

and after the joy or the pain – whatever – the Weetbix  
rule at Sanitarium. Poets sprawl on a cracked old breadboard

cut to the quick by the wounds of a friend, and Māori voices  
in translation spit on the pages and vanish again. Fuck my days

you sing in praise of the twisted ones with their nerves  
of steel, who ride to the factory comatose for another

day at the same old wheel. You prophesy walls that tumble  
and fall and still we feel the machinery grinding, mincing

the lame with the halt and the blind, while Zambuks mass  
to remove the wounded. Seagulls wheel and crawlers

squeal on mates who struggle to feed the whānau, freighters  
leave and the masses heave from sonnet to ode in

epic mode. Meanwhile the teachers talk of strike while nurses  
ratchet up their claim, and if to you, it's all the same, no pain

no gain, or turn it off – Jim, you were grim, but you knew how  
to laugh, and if I was still that young romantic crying your loss

back God knows when (if I could be that kid again, chip on  
my shoulder, locks of gold), with you and the rest of the restless

nation, I'd do it all again. So I close the book and we walk away,  
out over Wellington Harbour, where the Māori Jesus sings

~~~~~

To Millicent Baxter, Brighton

9 October 1945

Dear Mother,

I have been working rather hard of late. Intended to write to you and Daddy on Sunday but was helping the boss round up hoggets. I help a bit at the lambing. Some ewes die and some lambs, but the snow was not very harmful. Ewes have a much easier time than human mothers, anyway. They baa a little in distress then lie down and heave. The lamb emerges neatly packaged, and when the ewe has torn off the bag there is the marvel – a real snuffling lamb. Perhaps if human mothers licked their children and swallowed their afterbirths everything would be just as beautifully simple. Perhaps.

Everything seems to go on simultaneously here. Just lately I have been doing a lot of top-dressing. Standing on the fourwheeler as I said before. There is heavy lifting involved, but I'm getting used to it, no fear of rupturing myself. I can never quite get used to the pale blue sky over the green willows. The scenery is probably unique.

I was paid on Saturday. About £4/10/-. Am sending down £2 of it, and probably the whole of next pay, as I don't spend much. Next pay about £9/-/-. On Friday night I dreamt an involved dream, narrative type to which I am rather subject, in which I am more or less reading a never-before-heard-of book. About a Swedish student, rather the sporting type, who fell in love with 2 girls. Mainly about the feelings of the Good girl very acute until he realized his errors and married her. I woke up wondering why on earth I should have such an emotional insight into the mind of a woman. On Saturday evening I saw a film Home in Indiana, a rather fine film with horses in it. The theme was very similar, the emotional quality identical. The hero was a horsey boy, however. But in the supports to the film there was a scene of skiing in Sweden. Utterly convincing for me of the Dunse theory, though perhaps not for anyone hearing about it.

I have joined the Public Library. Got out Hemingway's The Farewell to Arms [sic]. In some ways a stupendous piece of writing. Also tenderness and deep feeling not usual in Hemingway.

Also a book on Edward VIII. Rather anti. I got a very good impression of Edward's position, a big crisis for him. He chose the right way. He could have (a) become the picture-book king accepting 'duty' (the Author's preference) or (b) kept Mrs Simpson as a mistress, if she agreed, rather a weak compromise, like his grandfather's or (c) moved entirely from the statue into the man. Rather surprising that Edward who was not very intelligent, should have been able to do what he did. I think the War affected him rather as it did Sassoon, forced him out of usual acceptance (still with his very average intelligence), and he had enough vitality not to relapse entirely.

I will write to Baigent. Have been intending to anyway for some time. Have had a couple of bathes in the lake. Very cold. If you see my trunks around, send them up. If not, don't bother just now.

Quite naturally, I appreciate you and Daddy intensely when I am away from you. Not the direct need of a child, but more complex realizations. I often look on you – the manageress debater, political informant – as soft and feminine, requiring protection. Even Daddy has the benefit of my feeling he needs shielding. Especially where he is vulnerable, as with Ten's real or assumed tough-spots.

Here are a couple of poems written lately, like all my poems not intended as absolute dictums but unanalysed feelings permanent or transitory.

[High Country Weather]

Alone we are born And die alone;

Yet see the red-gold cirrus

Over snow-mountain shine.

Upon the upland road

Ride easy, stranger:

Surrender to the sky

Your heart of anger.

[The first of many griefs]

*The first of many griefs for such as live by pain was never love of girls but that old men
not hardy and not wise nor famed by singers; whose lives are blacksmith's pride or green fingers;
for whom mute iron spoke and leaf sought sun; should under earth fall not to be known again.*

All my love to you and Daddy

Jum

KIRSTY GUNNS' RESPONSE:

I've searched and tried to think of everywhere they might be, but darling, I can't find those trunks. Are you sure – are you certain? - you don't have them with you?

I'm writing this at night, years and years after your life and death, upon the publication of these letters of yours, the letters to us all that you have written... And here am I, a mother, not your mother, but I still I read the letters you write to her and I become her as I read, as though I might be her and you my own glad boy.

Motherhood makes sons and daughters of all the children - and so when you write asking for the things you need, and telling me about what you are doing, your brave work with the new born lambs and dying ewes, the snow, your standing there, uncertainly, I sense, on the four wheel drive as it careers along the bumpy earth, your telling me about your heavy lifting....It makes me want to comfort you, write back to you in the midst of your boyhood, your young adulthood, to protect you through these years while the child is still fully formed within the man...

You write as though wanting to make it easier for me, to be away from you, in order that it may be easier for you... I am right here, though; I've not gone away. Your letters come for me, and in each one I hear you speaking.

Kirsty Gunn

~~~~~

**To Grace Adams, Christchurch**

10 July 1963

Dear Grace,

*I'm an old bastard for not writing – but I've been balled up with writing 2 talks that I have to give to an Adult Education [group] up North in August. All about the pointlessness of education for the arts, and how good writing depends on understanding one's experience. About love. I think the hunger to be loved is an abyss in most of us. It lies behind all the sour faces; and a man in the electric chair could rightly say – 'I'm here because I wanted too much to be loved.' When a man goes to a brothel he pays a fiver for the illusion of being loved, because he fears nobody could love him in fact. When a woman tells her husband off for dropping ash in the fender, she is saying 1,000 times in a 1,000 different ways – 'You have never loved me enough.' O.K. But it is the child in us. One has to learn to love without demanding it in return; and then the lifelong wounds begin to heal at last. I've never seen what people call 'sex' in the world – only an unending desire to be loved. And when we blame people for not loving us enough, we blame them for not being God. So Feiffer is right when he says this 'breaking through to others' is a disease – why should we want to break anything? – but to give others anything we possibly can is the only way to lead a happy life – to stop asking and give everything we can. The Church ultimately relieved my sex problems for me because I knew at last that I was in the lifelong grasp of Divine Love, absolutely cared for. Then, though sex remained as an extra and a source of humour, the hunger went, which was a hunger to be loved. And so I was able to give whatever I happened to possess to J. or my kids or my friends, with a peaceful mind. Sometimes the peace is so deep that I feel one could die of it, like a sailor in the middle of the Pacific. Sometimes a twinge of the old asking returns, and this fundamental happiness gets clouded. That's when I'm most vocal, unfortunately – but it's not really me. I know you're not Lady Muck, my dear. Why shouldn't you have a little money? As long as it doesn't make you unhappy. Your own heart will tell you soon enough if it begins to get suffocated. But you have a natural tendency to look for depth and be dissatisfied with the shallow water. It will bring you on the journey I too hope for, to the very heart of God one day.*

**NATHAN JOE'S RESPONSE:**

Dear Jim

Seven Lessons from a Hypocrite by Nathan Joe

1. Perhaps there are two kinds of men in the world. Those who will never feel comfortable in their own skins and those who feel comfortable enough to invade others'.
2. You blame the things we do on love or a lack thereof. A man in an electric chair, a scolding woman, the child in us. To love without demanding it in return is what you suggest. A lesson no doubt you yourself ought to have learned much earlier. You call this need for love an abyss, and I think I agree with that.
3. You were a product of your time. I'm careful to differentiate the fine line between contextualising and excusing bad behaviour. Of understanding versus justifying. The things you did were during a time when it was legal, some will say. Marital rape was legal in Aotearoa until 1985, but then again loving another man was illegal until 1986. I am reminded of Hannah Gadsby's warning about the dangers of so-called good men drawing the line between right and wrong. There are the ethics of the land and the law but then there are also the ethics we know deep down in our hearts.

4. You critique the language of love, the 'breaking through to others' as you quote Feiffer. And you're right. The way we talk about love seems inextricably bound to violence. Falling in love. Lovesick. Heart break. Even mere infatuations are labelled crushes. With love like that who needs war or hate?
5. Unlike you, I have no God. I am a faithless man with no Jerusalem to call my own. No, my body is my only temple. My home is not a thing or place but the tenuous connections between myself and others.
6. I think the greatest tragedy is not that you were such a good poet, but that you knew what it meant to love. You did! To poeticise and pontificate the nature of it. But still fail time and time again. And I think fuck I have failed too. Too often. I have stolen kisses from boys with boyfriends in bathroom bars, carved words into knives and flung them recklessly at lovers, I have lied by omission and broken promises too often.
7. I hope that we will one day stop justifying the bad behaviour of our Roman Polanskis and Woody Allens and yes our James K Baxters with their art. That to criticise bad men isn't only to crucify them, and to appreciate their art isn't simply to exonerate them. That there is a gap between who they are and what they say, which we can learn from. The daunting distance between our many contradictory selves. No, I will never be as good a writer as you. But I hope to be a better man.

~~~~~

To Archibald Baxter, Brighton [Undated. 1939?]

Dear Daddy,

Perhaps you might like to hear this poem which I enclose. It is a different style from any I have written before, so I want very much to hear your criticism of it. The meaning may seem a little obscure, but it means that I often make up beautiful poems at night which in the hard morning light seem senseless and meaningless. Please show it to Mother if you think it is any good.

With love to all

From Jum

P.S. Please write soon, if you have time.

At school I have no time to dream
As sailing on Life's steady stream,
The scurrying hours go by,
But when at night my Muse awakes,
Then soaring wings my fancy takes,
Far to the land of poesy.
When morn doth come, I am bereft
For nothing but the leaves are left,
Of all my fairy gold
And when the bustling day begins,
In dark'ning clouds my vision thins,
And lesson-times unfold.

IAN WEDDE'S RESPONSE:

Dear James

Much of what we wake to in the morning may seem senseless and meaningless and so it often is. At present the likelihood that we are about to embark on yet another war seems more senseless and meaningless than soaring wings and fairy gold. But James my dear son I do not want to discourage your wish to be a poet far from it. Nor do I want to remind you of my own experience as a conscientious objector in the last war that was called 'Great'. More useful to your wish to be a poet than my experience may be the example of the poet you know I love, Robbie Burns. Like your father, Robbie Burns was familiar with the work of the farmer who must put his hand to the plough

rather than to the gun, but who may also put his hand to the pen once his day's work is done. I see that without intending to I have rhymed gun with done and though I am no poet this may teach us that such effects as rhyme can be natural, rather than contrived like your carefully thought out rhyme of begins and thins. But what Robbie Burns' example may teach you, young Poet James, is that the daytime rhythms of walking behind the plough or indeed of many kinds of labour are fine instructors in the art of poetry. I find that these humble rhythms of work focus the mind, so that for example having written about sailing on Life's steady stream we do not straightaway move to scurrying hours, since the steady stream and the scurrying hours seem to be strange companions in the dreamless time of school. As your father I should be glad that you have no time to dream while at school, except that dreaming and thinking can sometimes be the same thing, so long as the thinking notices that it is only leaves that are left of what you call fairy gold. At this point the thinking part of dreaming needs to put its hand up and ask, what is fairy gold and why does fairy gold produce leaves? Since you are only thirteen years old, I hope you can find a way to focus your thoughts and dreams on the springtime of your youth rather than the autumn of premature ageing. Do not try to get too old too soon, but use your fresh young mind to see the world and to think-dream about it. You have the old rulers of poetry leaning on your young shoulder and twisting your ear towards tired old figures of speech such as dark'ning clouds and vision thins rather than the fresh young language that you speak in the playground with your comrades. The verse form in which Robbie Burns composed many of his verses was both a bagpiper's chaunt and a dance step, it was capable of being uttered with enjoyment by any person whose ordinary speech was itself its own kind of poetry that did not need to give itself airs. You know the verses Burns wrote after ploughing up a field-mouse's nest, of which the first two go like this:

Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a pannic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry man's dominion,
Has broken nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

The language is plain even as it dances and has the skirrl of the pipes in it. The poet Robbie Burns is not beating his breast with self-pity but expressing his regret at disturbing a fellow creature. No doubt Burns could have found some sentimental words to describe the mouse, but he does not do so. Instead, at the heart of these two verses, is the phrase 'nature's social union'. That is where the poem's heartbeat is found. My advice is to find such heartbeats in your own dreaming and thinking, and let them do away with the scurrying hours soaring wings and fairy gold. Your mother thinks I have been harsh, but I see by her smile that she hopes you will get a grip. Nineteen thirty-nine is likely to be remembered for grimmer stuff than fairy gold my dear James.

Your loving father, Archibald.

~~~~~

**To Jacquie Baxter, Napier**

Tuesday 20 December 1949

*Sunday: Hoped to get to Communion, but didn't have time. Away early, and through to Wanaka. Stopped at the Kawerau Gorge by the suspension bridge. A great depth, the river boiling under. Fine weather. (Earlier called at the Queenstown aerodrome to see about supplies to be dropped at the Aspiring Hut and on the glacier. Made friends with a small black cat.) Wanaka about 3. Lunch. Picked up 2 of the climbers, good friendly chaps though somewhat dour at first sight. On up to Aspinall's at the back of Wanaka – where you can address letters to. Mountains leaning over everywhere. A gigantic dinner. Slept in sleeping-bag under dining-room table. Monday: Much of goods packed on horses. Set off up Matukituki Gorge fairly late. (The night before we left the truck on the other side of the river, crossed in a dray, dogs swimming after.) In through Hell's Gate, great blackened precipices. Got my feet wet for the first time crossing a creek. Many cataracts on the mountain faces. Boulders like dice. Forests of black birch growing thicker as one goes higher up. A twelve-mile tramp. Crossed the river in one place, waist-deep and very cold and rapid, hard to keep balance. Later on, round a bend, the sight of huge rambling glaciers and ice like tablecloths, mounting up to incredible heights. The valley bottom green again, a lot wider, Switzerland-cum-Canada. Made some verse notes. Reached the hut, on a green plateau above the river, about 6 o'clock. Meal of tinned beef, lettuce, radishes etc. To bed fairly early, tired and very depressed. This won't give you much idea of how I have felt. The first half of the journey was a kind of dreamlike rush. But from Queenstown onward I have thought much of you and Hilary. I think I know now why people climb mountains. But I am not the kind to make a mountaineer. Best wishes to your people, And all my love to you.*

*Best Jim*

**ANNABEL WILSON'S RESPONSE:**

To James K. Baxter,

Form 1, 1990:

I liked your landscapes. Being born in Dunedin, growing up on the Taieri, with school holidays in Wānaka, family picnics and fishing trips in the Mātukituki valley, your poetry of these places resonated with me from an early age. One of the first poems I learnt by heart was, A Christmas Wish - from the card Jacquie Sturm and yourself sent to Charles Brasch:

Not mistletoe and holly  
To ward off melancholy,  
Carols in the chapel,  
Plum pudding and crab apple;  
But to camp for a week  
By a mountain creek,  
With new-taken trout  
Or tinned pears to eat,  
With tea boiled in a billy,  
And the morepork in the gully.

For me, your poetry became part of these wild Southern landscapes, your words inscribed upon those familiar spaces - Brighton beach, Tunnel Beach, Taieri Mouth, Aspiring. J.E Weir's green tome of your Collected Poems took up some serious real estate on my bookshelf, alongside W.H. Oliver's James K. Baxter - A Portrait. Whenever I hiked or mountain biked into the Mātukituki valley, it was difficult to separate your poetry from the landscape. To be surrounded by those mountains and river without thinking of your representations of them: "Moonraker and Stargazer", "the smoking cateract", "the mitred peak" "sibilant falling... snow water".

Crossing the river, I'd think of how you stumbled there, dropping your typewriter along with a bunch of poems which later trampers found and returned to you, at Aspiring Hut. With Brian Brake, John Drawbridge and Douglas Lilburn, that ill-fated trip had you up the valley for six weeks, writing the script for a film that would exemplify a nationalistic, masculine, Pakeha representation of "the Heartland".

Climbing up to French Ridge, where your party was caught in a storm, it's not hard to imagine the four of you up there, a group of men on a creative mission, in the summer of 1949. It was to be a "cinematic poem", a statement about conquest as you sought to establish a sense of place and self in relation to the landscape and through your explorations, as you describe in the letter. This was men pursuing their vision, scaling the heights - physically and artistically, a far remove from the "Child and wife" in the "lawful city".

The woman's place in this poem is at a great distance from the mytho-poetics of the rest of "Poem in the Matukituki Valley".

That's what concerns me now, as a reader of the letters in 2019. When given the opportunity to respond to a letter in this collection, I thought I'd consider my connection to Baxter's poetry of place. After agreeing to participate but before I began the project of choosing a letter to respond to, the collection made headlines ("[James K. Baxter, rapist](#)", "[Venerated poet's letters about marital rape rock New Zealand](#)", "Art and monsters: what does it say about us?", "[Rethinking the legacy of James K. Baxter, darling of the literary elite](#)") for what the letters reveal so frankly about the writer's views on, and treatment of, women. Which makes it impossible for me to separate the writer from the misogynist statements, even if looking back provides a scope to see that stated sexual violence framed within a poet's use of hyperbole or within the context of the outmoded values of a patriarchal society.

I questioned whether I should participate in this event. Reconsidered what it meant if I did, and what it meant if I didn't. Does speaking here condone the stated sexual violence of the writer; or would not responding forfeit a chance to be heard, thereby contributing to another series of muted or marginalised voices? As a teacher of young women, should I keep teaching Baxter's poems? How can it be ok today, in the #metoo era, to study this art in isolation; severed from its artist? As a feminist, I cannot critique with one lens, and leave the artist's life to one side when that artist has self-proclaimed harmful attitudes and actions towards women.

Rape is referenced more than 17 times in the Collected Letters. The two volumes, published by VUP with funding from CNZ, are on bookshelves with a \$100 RRP.

It's 2019. Epic posthumous collections of letters don't get published much these days. Is this collection part of a fading rear guard of books like it? In 50 years, will the archivists, estate trustees

and editors instead publish collections of tweets and threads from unearthed USBs and hard-drives; the i-messages and emails writers sent to their family, friends and contemporaries? What might they reveal?

(I fantasize that in 2070, these historical records of digital-ephemera from 2019 will show ... a po-mo mash-up of questions and ideas, with equitable representative balance, fluidity, openness, mysteries. Who would get to decide who and what would go in those new opuses anyway?)

Now when I'm wandering in the Mātukituki Valley, I think of today's poetic responses; of the mother in [Bernadette Hall's poem in that place](#):

"hair streaming, running with a baby in her arms,  
saving me again and again from the burning house."

Or [David Eggleton's Moa](#) in the same, where:

"Mountains crouch like tigers, resentful,  
and Moa's seeking eyes grow blind,  
upstream, wading towards the taniwha."

I think of how Papatūānuku took over in the summer of '49 and that masculine mountaineering cinema-poem never got made. I think of the 'child and wife' in the 'lawful city'. I think of the receiver of the letter from Tuesday 20 December 1949, a pioneer, true rangatira and acclaimed poet in her own right. I think back, way back to the earliest stories of those mountains, that river. And now I'm thinking in non-linear time, in what Cilla McQueen called "deep time" about how the name Mātukituki is onomatopoeic, in constant motion, ever-changing, fluid in all senses.

So I started with the landscape; now I return to a changed landscape, altered territory. Because I see it as a political and personal responsibility, I could not respond to any of the letters without addressing the fact that within the letters, there is brazen bragging about rape.

And that's why there's now some fresh, wide-open space on my bookshelf.

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