

# *That 'austere anti-aesthetic angel':*

## *James K. Baxter and Puritanism*

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It is necessary to begin with an apology to James K. Baxter. In my previous musings on the Puritan legacy in New Zealand I have chastised Baxter, along with other writers and critics of his generation, for using Puritanism as a reductive catchphrase to summarise all that they most despise about New Zealand society (Moffat, 'Destruction'). The phrase that I have repeatedly used to epitomise Baxter's perceived antagonism is his description of Puritanism as an 'austere anti-aesthetic angel' (*Complete Prose* 2. 328). Returning to this phrase as I meditate at much greater length on Baxter's relationship with Puritanism, I realise that I am guilty of flattening and simplifying what is a much more complex engagement with Puritanism in his prose writing. Baxter's phrase contains both condemnation and implied praise. He was vehemently opposed to what he regarded as the Puritan suspicion of imagination and sexuality, and throughout his writing castigated all the social and religious forces that sought to curb and quell aestheticism and the natural, instinctual self. Yet, he also refers to Puritanism as 'austere', a quality that much of his writing and his own life choices suggest he regarded as admirable, particularly as it relates to a paring back and relinquishing of the unnecessary paraphernalia of capitalism and materialism. And what to make of 'angel'? Surely this is more than simply alliterative effect. It too undercuts the antagonism of 'anti-aesthetic' to suggest that in Baxter's eyes there is at least a trace of the

divine about Puritanism and its legacy.

Ambiguity and complexity are the hallmarks of Baxter's engagement with Puritanism in his prose writing. My discussion begins with a consideration of 'Puritanism' as a word that has been loaded with ambivalence from its coining in the sixteenth century. I then turn to the more simplistic ways in which New Zealand authors, critics and social historians have used the term. This forms a necessary contextual backdrop for the succeeding analysis of Baxter and Puritanism, which begins with the autobiographical essays in which he reflects on the formative influences that shaped him as a man and as a writer, progresses to his nuanced writings on human duality and his preference for Catholic mercy over Protestant castigation of the sinner, and ends with his rebuke of both church and state, through which he emerges as a prophetic figure reminiscent of a fiery Puritan preacher.

*'The very plague of the Church and the Commonwealth': The Anti-Puritan Tradition*

'Puritan' and 'Puritanism' are hotly contested terms that have generated much debate between religious scholars and historians. It is not my intention to delve into the minutiae of these disputes, but to point to the key ways in which what Patrick Collinson calls 'the P word' (41) was used in the early modern period and, more particularly, in the New Zealand context.

The first printed use of the term 'Puritan' was in the 1572 *An Admonition to Parliament*, which declared that 'we in England are so far off from having a church rightly reformed according to the prescript of God's Word, that as yet we are not come to the outward face of the same'. The 'outward marks whereby a true Christian church is known' were identified as 'preaching of the Word purely, ministering of the sacraments sincerely, and ecclesiastical discipline which consisteth in admonition and correction of faults severely'. The anonymous authors of what Collinson describes as a

'public polemic in the guise of an address to Parliament' (118) embrace the term 'Puritan', turning what was coined as a derogatory description of Reformed Protestant extremism into a badge of honour.<sup>1</sup>

*An Admonition to Parliament* points to the way in which Puritan became 'the brand name for a certain kind of Protestant religiosity, social conduct and politics', linking the various English and Scottish denominations, influenced by the theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin, who called for the Church to be purified of Catholic hierarchies, ritual and ornamentation (Collinson 27). From its inception, those who identified themselves as Puritan were strongly non-conformist, seeking to reform both church and state into a godly Commonwealth and unafraid to speak out against a range of theological and social issues, from the wearing of liturgical vestments, to the need for parliamentary reform, to the evils of adultery and fornication.

John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim highlight that from the late sixteenth century 'Puritan' was also used as a 'term of abuse', a 'handy smear word for bishops angered by clerical nonconformity, metropolitan playwrights provoked by censorious moralism, and villagers driven to distraction by assaults on traditional festive culture' (1). John Whitgift, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, derided that

his name Puritane is very aptely giuen to these men, not because they be pure no more than were the Heretikes called Cathari, but because they think them selues to be *mundiores ceteris*, more pure than others, as Cathari dyd, and separate them selues from all other Churches and congregations as spotted and defiled. (18)

In 1605 Oliver Ormerod promised that his *Picture of a Puritane* would promote a 'full detestation of the Puritanfaction' through its exposé of the Puritans' 'Perseuerance in Schism' and 'disdaine to be ruled' (in Sasek 238–54). Two years later John Sprint railed against Puritanism as

1 For a history of the pejorative use of 'Puritan' see Holden.

promoting 'a schismatically, private, and prepared spirit to any headlesse error or brain-sicke heresie' (*Propositions, Tending to Proove the Necessarie Use of the Christian Sabbaoth or Lords Day*, 1607, quoted in Poole, *Radical Religion* 188). James I went as far as describing the Puritans as 'verie pestes in the Church and Commonwealth' of Scotland in his 1599 *Basilikon Doron* (49), a claim that he returned to in his later critique of the English Puritans whom he regarded as 'the very plague of the Church and the Commonwealth' ('A Puritane Set Forth in his Lively Colours', 1642, quoted in Poole, 'Dissecting Sectarianism' 45). For William Shakespeare 'Puritan' was a fitting epithet for the lugubrious Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (2. 3. 140).

This revulsion against Puritanism continued well into the twentieth century, with historians and authors from the eighteenth century onwards focusing more on a perceived anti-pleasure Puritan repressiveness than on theological radicalism. Lord Macaulay, the nineteenth-century British historian, claimed that '[t]he Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators' (Macaulay 1. 168). Even more famous is H. L. Mencken's and George Jean Nathan's assessment that 'Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy' (39). Other often-cited definitions include G. K. Chesterton's definition of 'the essential of the Puritan mood' as 'having righteous indignation about the wrong thing' (564), Oscar Wilde's quip that 'No son of mine should ever take the side of the Puritans: that is always an error' (153), and D. H. Lawrence's claim that 'To the Puritan all things are impure' (10).

New Zealand social historians, literary critics and writers are particularly fond of this glib shorthand. 'Anguished self-flagellation,' scoffs Gordon McLauchlan (*Passionless People* 17). 'Misplaced demands and guilts,' complains Robert Chapman (98). 'A contempt for love, a sour spit, a denial of life itself,' protests Bill Pearson (225). These responses are linked by their perception of Puritanism as the source of all

that is damaging to the psyche: guilt; repression; gloom; self-righteousness. The New Zealand critical revulsion against Puritanism mirrors the twentieth century attack on Calvinism by Scottish authors and critics. Poet Edmund Muir captures these sentiments, writing that 'Calvinism was . . . a religion which outraged the imagination' and 'helped to produce that captivity of imagination in Scotland . . . What Knox really did was to rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance' (308–09).

This vilification is one-dimensional and misleading, signalling a failure to grasp that Puritanism is a complex phenomenon consisting of antithetical elements. The American historian Charles A. Beard acknowledges that at times Puritanism is a synonym for 'harsh restraint . . . sour faced fanaticism . . . tyranny . . . intolerance . . . stinginess'. However, he argues that it also advocates 'equal rights . . . liberty . . . democracy . . . resistance to tyranny . . . self-government . . . industry' (16). This dichotomy is evident in the women's suffrage campaign in New Zealand. Patricia Grimshaw (ix) and Alan Grimes (8) have pointed to the 'Puritan' origins of the movement in New Zealand, America and Australia. Emerging from the prohibition campaign, the New Zealand woman's movement was committed to both moral improvement and a radical overhaul of government policy to give all women, Māori and pākehā the vote (Macdonald; Lovell-Smith). H. R. Trevor-Roper writes that '[e]very age has its own social context, its own climate, and takes it for granted. . . . To neglect it – to use terms like "rational", "superstitious", "progressive", "reactionary", as if only that was rational which obeyed our rules of reason, only that progression which pointed us – is worse than wrong: it is vulgar' (15–16). This kind of vulgarity has dogged the history of Puritanism, particularly in New Zealand where, since Jane Mander diagnosed the New Zealand 'disease' as Puritanism in her 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River* (27), historians, literary critics, and creative writers (particularly the cultural nationalists of the

1940s–70s) have seized on the term as a convenient cover-all for everything they detest about New Zealand society and have ignored the positive aspects of its legacy.

Frank Sargeson's declaration in a 1950 broadcast that 'what is pervadingly characteristic of New Zealand is its own particular variety of puritanism' (60) struck a chord with social historians, popular polemical writers and literary critics. Keith Sinclair insists that the 'moral attitudes of [New Zealand] society were moulded, perhaps more decisively than in Australia or the United States, by puritanical forms of Christianity' (278), Gordon McLauchlan comments that 'a strong strain of puritanism runs through the New Zealand character' (*Big Con* 51), and Bill Pearson goes as far as asserting that 'we are the most puritan country in the world' (209). From Sargeson to Pearson, this claim that New Zealand is a Puritan nation is not made with a sense of pride, but with a sense of gloom. Puritanism is viewed as a solely negative social influence, a harsh, repressive, destructive creed.

The most comprehensive catalogue of the Puritan deficiencies comes from H. Winston Rhodes:

It relies too heavily on a series of prohibitions. 'Thou shalt not' is more often used than 'Thou shalt'. Its morbid consciousness, especially in relation to sexual impulses, fosters feelings of guilt for no valid reason and tends to destroy all reverence for warm physical life. Its heavy emphasis on the importance of work, irrespective of value, and its distrust of all forms of leisure that do not involve energetic muscular activity lead to an almost pathological suspicion of irregularity, of artistic endeavour and of happy-go-lucky non-conformism. Conventional respectability and an ingrained materialism are disguised by outward forms of piety; and prudery becomes synonymous with virtue. (40–41)

These definitions of Puritanism are linked not only by their negativity, but also by their focus on Puritanism as a secular force. Rhodes writes that critics such as Sinclair, commenting on the Puritan presence in New Zealand society, are 'not

thinking primarily of the seventeenth-century Puritans in England nor of the dream of the promised land that may have been in the minds of many of the Pilgrim Fathers who reached America in the same century', but of Puritanism as a 'secular' form (40).

Literary critics such as Pearson and Rhodes speak of the need for New Zealand literature to be at the vanguard of the attack on Puritanism. Pearson's call for artists to take part 'in awakening New Zealanders from their fretful sleep' of complacent Puritanism and provincialism (230) is typical of the perception that authors have a duty to reform all that is wrong with society – in other words, rid New Zealand of Puritanism. Robert Chapman celebrates

[t]he attitude which the New Zealand writer takes to his society, and which informs his work . . . [which is] based on the possibility here of a truly human ease and depth of living and on an attack on the distortion produced by an irrelevant puritanism of misplaced demands and ~~g~~guilts. (98)

For Eric Cook, the only hope of revival for the 'Puritan corpse already smelling' was the 'release of the pent splendid force of sex' (Jones 30; Stenhouse, 'Puritanism' 160). Gordon McLauchlan's influential social commentary *The Passionless People* (1976) reprised the work of Pearson and Chapman, castigating pākehā New Zealanders as 'a racially and culturally homogenous group of people who have nurtured in isolation . . . a Victorian, lower-middle class, Calvinist, village mentality' (1). Many of these commentators blamed women for perpetuating Puritanism, leading to what Lawrence Jones terms 'literary misogyny' (427). Denis Glover lampooned New Zealand's 'lady writers' as a 'bunch of bores in stuffy drawers', A. R. D. Fairburn railed against 'the menstrual school', and Frank Sargeson divided New Zealand literature into a 'major', 'masculine' tradition and a 'minor', 'feminine' tradition (Murray 65, 168; Sargeson 28–33).

For much of the twentieth century, McLauchlan's, Pearson's and Chapman's assessments of Puritanism as the

disease from which New Zealand society and New Zealand letters needed to be purged and cured remained unchallenged. Mark Williams has identified the enduring pattern of New Zealand literary representations of religion as 'pervasive, utterly negative, deeply implicated in resented female power, and identified with puritanism' (11–13). My own work (Moffat, 'Destruction'; 'Two Preacher Novelists'; 'Mr Calvin and Mr Knox') has sought to broaden the discussion, pointing to both the seeds of the anti-Puritan tradition in nineteenth-century literature and the presence of literary voices, such as Bannerman Kaye, Guy Thornton and Herman Foston, that engage with Puritanism in positive ways. The most important corrective comes from the scholarship of John Stenhouse. His pivotal 2012 essay on 'Puritanism, Literary Culture, and New Zealand History' seeks to 'rescue puritans and their churches from the condescension of posterity' and highlights that the New Zealand engagement with Puritanism was far more complex than previous assessments have acknowledged ('Puritanism' 154; see also Stenhouse, 'Religion and Society'). Stenhouse begins his exploration of New Zealand Puritanism with Baxter, acknowledging that, as for so many authors of his generation, Puritanism was a 'poison' that had contaminated the self and society, but also pointing to the 'puritan origins' of Baxter's 'anti-puritan self' ('Puritanism' 151, 163). Other scholars, in particular Liam McIlvanney ('Poems Like Hand Grenades'), have drawn attention to the ambivalence of Baxter's relationship with his Calvinist inheritance, and the remainder of this article builds on this foundation, highlighting the complex nature of his engagement with Puritanism in his prose writing.

*'the bones of a dinosaur': Baxter's Calvinist Inheritance*

Biographers and literary critics have highlighted that Puritanism, in both its theological and secular forms, was a formative influence on Baxter. Vincent O'Sullivan writes that

Through both parents he drew on a stern Protestant tradition



which he reacted against strongly, but never outgrew. His later strictures against New Zealand society, and his eventual rejection of almost everything which defines our European social life, spring from his feelings against [the Calvinist ethos]. (3)

Baxter's biographer Frank McKay traces the different strands of this inheritance. On his father's side, the theological legacy was Scottish Presbyterianism, although religion played little part in his grandfather John Baxter's life until he gave up alcohol for thirteen years after hearing the Plymouth Brethren preach in Brighton (McKay 6-7). More significantly, Baxter was the heir to the deeply non-conformist, radical Puritan strain through his father Archibald Baxter who, along with his brothers, was a committed pacifist. Archibald was a humanist with socialist sympathies. He did not go to church, although his outlook was grounded on his 'own understanding of Christ's command to love thy neighbour' (7). Like the radical sixteenth-century Puritans, he was prepared to suffer for his beliefs, refusing to relinquish his pacifism even when subjected to brutal torture by the military during World War I.

In contrast, Baxter's maternal grandparents, particularly his grandfather John Macmillan Brown, 'represented for him a system of education, a puritan devotion to hard work and material advancement, conformity, and respectability' (32). The outlook of his mother, Millicent Baxter, particularly on matters relating to sexuality, is captured by Baxter's description of her reaction to he and his cousin showing each other their bottoms: 'God and all his bulldozers were on the march [and I felt] fear . . . the most extreme I have ever felt' (Oliver 28). McKay writes that much of Baxter's life was 'lived in reaction to the strict regime of his childhood and the strong personality of his mother' (45). Like Sargeson and Hector Bolitho, Baxter thus adds to the myth of the Puritan mother as a negative and repressive influence, curbing the natural instinct for sexuality. However, while Baxter's preference 'was for the attitudes and style of the Baxters', he 'could not

disown altogether, much less reconcile, the contrasting side of his inheritance. As he wrote much later, "In contradiction . . . I was born". The result, from childhood, was a divided self and a perennial inner conflict' (45).

In 'The Man on the Horse' and 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet', two of the autobiographical meditations that form part of *The Man on the Horse* (1966), Baxter identifies Puritanism as a shaping influence and a force against which he started to do battle from a young age. These reflections follow a similar trajectory to famous anti-Puritan narratives such as Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), with literature providing a liberating influence and bringing the individual to a place where, to use Gosse's words, he can claim 'a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself' (251). This pattern is also evident in several twentieth-century New Zealand narratives, such as Constance Clyde's *A Pagan's Love* (1905), Hector Bolitho's *Solemn Boy* (1927), Arthur H. Adams's *A Man's Life* (1929), and Frank Sargeson's *I Saw in My Dream* (1949). In each of these novels literature, socialist politics and nature propel the protagonist to reject his or her Puritan upbringing (Moffat, 'Destruction'). In the autobiographical essays discussed here, Baxter outlines a similar trajectory, and it is here that he is most like the anti-Puritan authors and commentators of his generation, with Puritanism very definitely positioned as the enemy against which the writer must struggle and overcome.

In a passage that has received astute critical attention from Stenhouse, Baxter writes that the 'society into which I had been born (and, indeed, modern Western society in general) carries like strychnine in its bones a strong unconscious residue of the doctrines and ethics of Calvinism' (2. 192). Stenhouse emphasises the connection Baxter draws between the 'sick society' he inhabits and himself ('Puritanism' 151). The Calvinist inheritance is described as a lurking, potentially deadly presence. Baxter's choice of

poison, strychnine, is significant. It is not a gentle poison; when taken in sufficient quantity it violently attacks the body, causing muscular convulsions and eventually death through asphyxia. Calvinism may not yet be fatal, but its poison is an indelible and immovable fixture in the bones of New Zealand society, an ominous, noxious presence. Given the associations of bones with an underlying structure – of the body, of a building, of society – the image speaks to the embedded nature of the contamination.

Another equally vivid image also links Calvinism to bones. Here Baxter compares the 'Calvinist ethos which underlies our determinedly secular culture' to 'the bones of a dinosaur buried in a suburban garden plot' (2. 220). 'Dinosaur' conjures pictures of the prehistoric, a once mighty presence that is now extinct, relegating Calvinism to an outdated, outmoded past. But Baxter's point is that, even if society does not acknowledge its presence, Calvinism is still a shaping force. The bones are buried, but represent the foundation on which the garden, or New Zealand society, is built. While the dinosaur itself may be dead, its essence seeps into the soil of the garden, just as Calvinism permeates the minds and morals of New Zealanders.<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Miles, John Davidson and Paul Millar link this passage to a dialogue Baxter constructs between Sisyphus and the Boulder, with the Boulder chastising Sisyphus for bad language when the Greek mythological figure explodes: 'You great bloody heap of the fossilized dung of a dinosaur.' Tellingly, Miles, Davidson and Millar write that the Boulder symbolises Calvinism, 'a system of values Baxter loathes but knows he must remain in touch with – shoulder to the rock – if his

2 I have found no evidence to suggest that Baxter was reading H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* when he was writing *Man on the Horse*, but I was struck by a passage from this novel that links strychnine to the prehistoric and also contains an implied reference to bones. The protagonist, reflecting nineteenth-century perceptions, regards strychnine as an aid to sleep and performance-enhancing tonic, declaring that 'Strychnine is a grand tonic . . . to take the flabbiness out of a man.' Dr Kemp replies, 'It's the devil. . . . It's the palaeolithic in a bottle' (132).

writing is to remain relevant to the lives of his fellow New Zealanders' (Miles et al. 16).

While the Calvinist legacy may be an 'unconscious residue' in wider society, Baxter himself is highly conscious of this force at work in his own psyche. In the same passage that compares Calvinism to dinosaur bones, he writes that as a child he was under great 'pressure . . . to accept' the core tenants of Calvinism: '*work is good; sex is evil; do what you're told and you'll be all right; don't dig too deep into yourself.*' At this stage, he 'could not fight these chiefly inward pressures', lacking 'the experience to contradict them and forge against them' (2. 220). He was haunted by the image of Prometheus, chained against the rock and enduring the daily devouring of his liver. Jettisoning Puritanism seemed as impossible as Prometheus escaping from the rock, but resisting it was as heroic as Prometheus's defiance of the gods to give humanity the gift of fire or his father's refusal to relinquish his pacifist beliefs.

As a young man, Baxter struggled against the Puritan fixation with sin, particularly the sexual sins of the body. Later in life he used the 'two heavy volumes of Calvin's *Institutes* as paperweights', but the words of this Protestant manifesto continued to haunt him: 'For our nature is not only utterly devoid of goodness, but so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle. . . . the whole man is in himself nothing else than concupiscence' (2. 192, quoting Calvin). Reading a ghost story in his formative years about a boy who dabbles in black magic and is pounced on by supernatural hounds before he reaches the safety of the church, he drew parallels between the narrative and his own sexual experiments. 'I think it stirred up in my mind the Calvinist image of reprobation. I had only to substitute auto-erotic practices for black magic, and there I was in the centre of the tale' (2. 220).

Baxter's father was an important influence as he gradually freed himself from the tentacles of Puritanism. While Archibald's 'Pacifist Church' shared many features

with organised religion, such as a pantheon of martyrs and its own set of scriptures, it promoted free thought rather than conformity. The key pacifist scriptures were 'Tolstoy and Gandhi and the New Testament suitably interpreted' and from an early age Baxter was made aware of the poetry of 'Burns and Shelley and Byron and Blake and Tom Hood and Henry Lawson'. Baxter writes that these early lessons, including the bullying he encountered because of his father's beliefs, were ultimately 'valuable, for they taught me to distrust mass opinion' (2. 217-19).

As McIlvanney has so insightfully written, Scottish poet Robert Burns was a strong, liberating, formative force. In 'Letter to Robert Burns', which Baxter quotes in 'The Man on the Horse', he applauds Burns for 'crack[ing] the wall of Calvin's jail' for both the Scottish nation and, by implication, himself (2. 194). Baxter describes the first volume of verse he was given, a volume of Burns's poetry, as 'a tribal gift' through which he could 'communicate with the dead and myself understand the language of the daimon'. It was also 'a kind of protective talisman', warding off the lingering effects of Calvinism (2. 192). It is no accident that in 'The Man on the Horse' Baxter's reference to the shielding properties of Burns immediately precedes his discourse on Calvin's *Institutes*. He writes that '[i]n Burns's poems the struggle of the natural man against that inhuman crystalline version of the total depravity of the flesh and the rigid holiness of the elect was carried out with superb energy, precision, and humour' (2. 193). As a man and as a poet, Burns's 'bawdry' formed what McIlvanney terms 'a welcome antidote to the repressive Calvinism of the Kirk' (14).

'Notes on the Education of a Young Poet' highlights four other authors whose influence on the young Baxter was significant. John Lehmann's *New Writing in Europe* linked him to 'a secret tribe of friends and lovers who waited, guns and poems and contraceptives in their hands, to welcome my coming of age' and, even more importantly, gave him a sense of a possible audience for his own verse. The reading

experience was so profound that it had 'some of the force of a religious conversion'. Ethel Mannin's anarchist tract *Bread and Roses* had a similar liberating effect, its emphasis on free will helping Baxter 'realise that I could in fact determine in some degree what course my life should take'. He decided that 'Bohemia' was his destination, an important term in Baxter's thinking that I will return to in the next section of this discussion. Carl Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* gave him cause for hope that as well as the ghosts and demons that haunted him there was the 'possibility that my subconscious mind might contain sources of peace and wisdom' (2. 222).

Above all, A. S. Neill's *A Dominie's Log* suggested that the 'Calvinist engine' could be put 'in reverse' and the mind 'de-educated'. Crucially, this enabled the eighteen-year-old Baxter to realise that the instinctive battle he had been fighting against his Calvinist education emerged from 'a kind of subconscious wisdom, and not from any source of malign perversity' (2. 223-24).

What is remarkable about Baxter's reflections on his formative influences, particularly in the context of the New Zealand engagement with Puritanism outlined at the beginning of this discussion, is his awareness that his deep struggle against the 'strychnine in his bones' helped to mould him into a great writer. He writes:

The negative aspects of my growth were in the long run the most help to me as a writer. They tempered the axe of intellect, as it were. A writer cannot avoid the task of exploring and understanding the private hell which lies just below the threshold of his own mind. (2. 222)

T. S. Eliot writes of 'the vital importance for a society of friction between its parts', declaring that 'one needs the enemy' (58-59). Writers need something to engage the emotions, to stir convictions, to react against. Puritanism was such a force in Baxter's development.

*'a permanently split mind': Puritan versus Anti-Puritan*

Baxter's prose reflections on the ongoing Puritan influence on New Zealand letters and New Zealand society establish a powerful dialectic between two opposing forces. At times he terms these the 'Puritan' and the 'anti-Puritan' and at times 'bourgeois' and 'Bohemia'. Throughout, his message is the same: be wary of the comfortable, conformist siren call of Puritanism and the bourgeois. It may represent ease, but it also stifles imagination and individuality. Yet, unlike the one-dimensional critics of Puritanism of his generation, Baxter also continues to acknowledge that there is some good in the Puritan tradition, if only to provide the aspiring poet and social critic with something to react against and a necessary inward tension out of which good art can emerge.

The quotation which began this chapter, Baxter's description of Puritanism as an 'austere anti-aesthetic angel' comes from his essay 'Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand' (1967). To place the fragment within its wider context, Baxter identifies the 'endemic problem of our poets' as a 'struggle' with 'the austere anti-aesthetic angel of Puritanism'. Here he sets up the parameters of a battle, a wrestling with Puritanism as a force that has the capacity to stifle the imagination. Yet the battle can be energising, giving the writer a sense of purpose. Baxter does not dismiss Puritanism entirely, acknowledging that 'a Puritan society can contain a great deal of primitive energy'. However, in order to 'transform this energy into aesthetic forms', he argues that authors have to 'develop non-Puritan modes of thought and feeling'. The Puritan suspicion of the 'natural forces latent in society and the individual', which represent a negative energy, must be transformed into a 'positive' acceptance of appetite (2. 238). In Freudian terms, Baxter is essentially urging an acceptance of the id.

To illustrate his argument of the damaging effects resulting from a failure to win the struggle against Puritanism, he provides two examples which act as warnings. In the first he chastises a 'Puritan community' that 'may severely inhibit

its writers and even throttle them', using as his anti-model a female author who gave up writing after her 'vigorous and perceptive' portrayal of a young married couple was castigated by New Zealand critics. The second profiles the case of Percival, whose brothel-visiting, drunken self was kept at a crippling distance from his poetry, resulting in anaemic and 'saccharine' verse (2. 328-29).

Baxter diagnoses Percival as suffering from 'a permanently split mind', an inescapable part of a 'Puritan ethic' that 'promotes neurosis' through its rejection of fallen humanity. Puritanism, for Baxter, is not misguided because of its theology or value, but because it seeks to repress parts of the self that are natural. It is this 'blocking from consciousness of necessary knowledge about oneself' that 'plays havoc with the communications of art' (2. 329).

Perhaps the most fascinating essay to tease out these dichotomous elements in the New Zealand character is 'The Puritan Devil' (1966). Here Baxter begins with the by now familiar evisceration of Puritanism, emphasising that it fosters 'split minds' (2. 124). Several critical analyses of Baxter, in particular Pat Lawlor's *The Two Baxters*, have emphasised the two sides of Baxter's personality. Lawlor's reflections begin with an introduction by Kevin Maher, who writes that

There are at least two Jim Baxters. . . . One is the patient, resigned, 'teach-me-to-care-and-not-to-care' Ash-Wednesday Baxter, bruised and educated by life, with a sympathy as wide as the world and a gentleness that is Franciscan. The other is the petty, still mixed-up teenager, lashing out indiscriminately at rather old-fashioned stereotypes of Puritans, Catholic teachers, bureaucrats, middle-class conformists, repressed celibates and all the rest . . . (Maher in Lawlor 7-8)

In 'The Puritan Devil' Baxter describes a somewhat different division than the world-weary, empathetic Baxter and the angry, impatient Baxter outlined by Maher. Baxter identifies one aspect of the New Zealand psyche as 'half



rational, clinical, polite, more or less humane'. This does battle with 'the other half, negative, unilluminated, violent, a wilderness of primitive prejudices and phobias, waiting to be stirred into action by some politician with an axe to grind' (2. 124). This second mind, or aspect of the national psyche – comprised of the 'sexual and aggressive impulses which the individual is unable to cope with' – is at odds with Puritanism, but 'not destroyed' by it. '[S]hoved further back in the mind', this 'Puritan devil' is a lurking presence. Baxter urges that rather than being relegated to the subconscious, this presence needs to be acknowledged and, if possible, accepted. The first stage involves a necessary rebellion against the tenants of Puritanism. This gives birth to the 'anti-Puritan', a 'person who has been singed by the fires of the Puritan "Satan" – and instead of running like mad, has had the courage to pull off the mask from that formidable figure and reveal what was there all the time – a tangle of nursery phobias – a "demonic" not a diabolic entity' (2. 125).

This is the point where most of Baxter's contemporaries stopped. Writers and commentators such as Pearson, Chapman and McLauchlan idealise this anti-Puritan, the author who can castigate provincial society, exposing its flaws, and lambasting its adherents. The role of the author, in this view, is to shock through the vigour of the anti-Puritan message. Baxter goes a step further. He acknowledges that 'A Puritan has to become anti-Puritan before he can become merely normal', recognising that anti-Puritanism is a part of a wider rite of passage. Note that anti-Puritanism is not the destination, it is a step on the journey of being 'merely normal'. Here Baxter uses 'normal' to describe a place of equipoise and harmony in which Puritanism no longer has any power. The anti-Puritan self is just as controlled and shaped by Puritanism as the Puritan self. Baxter's goal is a state beyond this, where '[o]ne would hope to cease to be anti-Puritan; to reach the point where one no longer cared a bugger who objected to the word "bugger" – but this takes time' (2. 125).

Did Baxter ever reach this place beyond the anti-Puritan?

McIlvanney suggests not, arguing that 'Baxter, for all his defiance of "the Puritan devil", remained deeply in thrall to his Calvinist heritage, so that the writing of bawdy verse was never the easy indulgence of a natural impulse but always the anxious infraction of a feared and hated creed' (45-46). Vincent O'Sullivan perhaps allows for the possibility, writing that

one of the enduring interests in Baxter is that he simply cannot be reduced to any category we try to fit him to. . . . It is the breadth of what probably we regard as his contradictions that will continue to make him so much more worth reading than anything his outright admirers, or detractors, put up on his behalf. (in Lawlor 75)

My encounter with Baxter's prose has certainly been with a man of contradictions, who simultaneously rejects Puritanism and acknowledges that it is a necessary part of a functioning society, who fashions himself as anti-Puritan but longs for a state and place of unity rather than division. An important step on this journey is to acknowledge the Puritan devil within, 'to *eat* him, chew him up, horns and tail and all, and swallow him down, and assimilate him as part of one's own personality' (2. 126). The imagery is grotesque and cannibalistic, but for Baxter only through this kind of vigorous acceptance can the possibility of progression beyond the anti-Puritan be found.

*'natural man, though wounded, is still the earth lamp who holds the oil of grace': Puritanism and Catholicism*

'Conversation with an Ancestor', one of the essays that comprises *The Man on the Horse*, suggests that if Baxter did succeed in moving beyond the anti-Puritan, the credit for this, in his eyes, lies in his conversion to Catholicism in 1958. Here his dissection of the 'conflict of the bourgeois and Bohemian values' in New Zealand is framed in historical and theological terms. Baxter is particularly balanced in his anatomisation of the 'bourgeois family man' in this

essay, acknowledging that he 'will always have the burden of maintaining most of the values of civilised life' and most of the 'necessary virtues – amiability, patience, prudence, punctuality, whimsicality, thrift and caution'. The danger lies not in these 'necessary virtues' but in the forgetting and repressing of the 'natural man' (2. 138). After twenty years 'of doubt and fumbling' Baxter came to believe that the split between the bourgeois and natural selves had its roots in the development of Christianity, particularly in the Reformation and the birth of Calvinism:

The Calvinist thesis that the Fall is absolute and the natural man totally depraved has led . . . to a kind of idolatry – a deep reliance, torn still by an anguish of uncertainty, on the civilising influence of education, culture, and the power of the State – as if these could eradicate the turbulence of the passions and put in their place an abstract social benevolence.

The Bohemian, or anti-Puritan, refuses to relinquish natural man and this impulse is sanctioned by Catholic theology which teaches that 'the Fall was not complete, and the natural man, though wounded, is still the earth lamp who holds the oil of grace.' Catholicism teaches that 'the only viable solution' to the split psyche that results from the Fall 'is a difficult humanism which works towards an understanding of the passions without being overthrown by them.' This Catholic humanism, unlike Puritanism, does not require an 'abandon[ment]' of art, but creates an environment in which creativity is possible because the natural self can be accepted rather than repulsed (2. 138).

Tellingly, Baxter argues in this essay that neither the Bohemian nor the bourgeois self is 'whole'; each is a 'half-man . . . because each turns away from some essential aspect of life'. Wholeness and 'balance' can only be achieved when 'those aspects of human nature which a neo-Calvinist would ignore or repudiate' are accepted. The 'capable writer' embraces the 'two sides of the life of man – the instinctual and the social, the wild and the domestic, the passionate and the rational –

and their art is the fruit of radical tension' (2. 139).

Catholicism provided a means for Baxter to achieve this 'balance', offering an accommodation between aspects of the self, in particular the man who was conscious of failure and sin and the man who longed for God. His criticism of the Puritan theological tradition is at its strongest in his prose writings praising the gift of mercy that he found in the Catholic Church. Baxter felt alienated by the emphasis that the Protestant churches (particularly those founded on Calvinist theology) placed on godliness, on demonstrating through moral action a state of grace that identified the believer as one of the elect. In contrast Catholicism offered for Baxter both a welcome to all sinners and a way back for those who strayed through the sacraments of confession and penance. Writing of Baxter's conversion to Catholicism in 1958, Elizabeth Isichei argues that what 'attracted him above all was the fact that the Catholic church was not a body of self-selected spiritual athletes, but a place where misfits, alcoholics, and prisoners could feel at home' (236). In 'Literature and Belief' Baxter writes about Séamas, an alcoholic contending with girlfriend trouble, money trouble, and trouble with the law, whose 'moral difficulties in no way disturbed the clear-cut faith which was his birth-right as an Irish Catholic'. Baxter declares that it was Séamas who 'taught me that belief, not virtue, was the entrance ticket at the door of church . . . He made possible for me to become a Catholic' (2. 157).

Baxter elaborates on these views in 'The Sacrament of Mercy' (1967). He writes that the Protestant churches 'require that one should already be a good man before one approaches God. There is an unwritten entrance ticket of at least minimal virtue.' This was all very well for individuals who resisted the sins of the flesh relatively easily, or who were predisposed towards a calm, certain belief. But what of the radicals and questioners, the doubters in search of some sort of comfort, the 'hoboes, poor men, reprobates, no-hopers, habitual criminals'? Baxter, who himself battled against

alcoholism and sexual appetite, identified strongly with these figures. Where could he find a pathway to God and a spiritual home? The answer lay in Catholicism, in particular penance, which required a recognition of error and a desire to change, not a demonstration of virtue: 'because of the institution by Our Lord of the Sacrament of Penance, a man does not require any virtue at all to be received into the Catholic Church, apart from the virtue of Faith which is itself a free gift from God' (2. 371-72).

Isichei writes that 'Baxter's spirituality was dominated by Mary . . . rooted in the essentially medieval belief that she was endlessly loving and forgiving' (244). Puritans and Calvinists represented 'the Other, outside the beloved church', but they too could be rescued from Purgatory through Mary's intercession (248). Baxter pleaded with Mary for the 'sheep of Calvin, clipped for Judgement Day' to be hoisted 'from the fire' ('Guy Fawkes Night', *CPoems* 259). This desire to see even those he despised and castigated receiving mercy marks Baxter as distinctly un-Puritan. A division of all humanity into the saved and the damned is a distinctive feature of Puritan theology. The seventeenth-century theologian Richard Sibbes wrote that there are 'two grand sides to the world, to which all belong: there is God's side and those that are his, and there is another that is Satan's, and those that are his' (quoted in Ryken 11). Puritan theologians such as Sibbes relished the thought of reprobates and unbelievers, including Catholics, writhing in the torments of hell fire. The preacher Jonathan Edwards went as far as declaring that 'the sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever' and 'make them more sensible of their own happiness' (234). In his desire for the 'sheep of Calvin' to be 'hoist . . . from the fire' Baxter exhibits a compassion that demonstrates he was able to transcend the anti-Puritan self discussed above, perhaps not always, but certainly in very profound and real ways.

*'Militancy is to sow the seed of an alternate society':*

*Baxter as Prophet*

In 'The Fortunate Country' Baxter outlines a tongue-in-cheek dream of a New Zealand utopia dominated by a 'Catholic majority'. In this world of large families and minimal state interference, there is plenty of bawdy and a resurgence of the arts, in part due to the abolition of cinemas, television and computers (2. 625). However, the reality of the society he inhabited was very far from this dream. Fired by his devotion to the poor and his embrace of Māori spirituality, Baxter's rage was increasingly directed not just at bourgeois, Puritan society, but also at aspects of the Catholic Church that had nurtured him. Isichei writes that Baxter 'grew increasingly alienated from . . . middle-class Catholicism, in which concern for the poor, if it existed at all, was often inadequate, ethnocentric, insincere, and accompanied by a non-radicalised lifestyle' (245).

In his later writing, particularly his 'Handbook for the Christian Militant' (1972) and 'A Walking Stick for an Old Man' (1972), Baxter's message is increasingly radical. Of course, in this Baxter was following models from within the Catholic Church, from Saint Francis and Ignatius Loyola to Mother Teresa. But, as I draw this discussion of Baxter's complex engagement with Puritanism to a close, it is also tempting to see residues of his Calvinist inheritance in his fiery diatribes. The early Puritans were militants and radicals, and the message of egalitarianism, community, and inward divinity articulated by sects such as the Diggers, Levellers and Ranters is echoed by Baxter. Indeed, aspects of 'Handbook for the Christian Militant' and 'A Walking Stick for an Old Man' bear a resemblance to Puritan pamphlets such as Abiezer Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649), which railed against hypocrisy and inequality and revelled in a vision of God as the great Leveller. Like Coppe, Baxter divides his message into short, sequentially numbered heads, each one self-contained but also contributing to the core message of radical societal and theological reform.

Meditating on whether Baxter can be described as a prophet, Ishichei comments that 'if he is a prophet, he was one with a remarkably simplistic social vision. Everything is black and white. He idealises the Catholic meths drinker, condemns the businessman and politician' (240). This simplicity and certainty of vision likewise bears a resemblance to Puritan prophetic writing such as *A Fiery Flying Roll*, as do Baxter's oratorical flourishes, metaphoric language, and combination of Old Testament allusions and New Testament teachings.

'A Handbook for the Christian Militant' rails against the 'practice' of the Catholic Church whose 'truth is . . . narrowed and structuralised' (3. 489). Baxter is particularly critical of the church's preoccupation with wealth, writing that the 'church has married herself to Dives our capitalist Pharaoh' (3. 490). This 'castrated church' is also so 'obsess[ed] with sexual purity' that it has lost its humanity and compassion (3. 492). It is as if the Catholic Church has been infected by what Baxter and other writers of his generation regarded as the key components of the Puritan 'disease': conformity, repressive morality and materialism. The Church worships a 'false Christ' who is

fashioned in the image of the middle class liberal who wants people to improve their personal morals but who does not challenge Pharaoh. His lost militancy is a ghost without a final resting place, directed now against pornography, now against change in the abortion laws, but never against the power structures of the pyramids. (3. 497)

Baxter calls for a rejection of this provincial mindset and a return to a church characterised by a social conscience and social justice. Christ is the prototype of this church militant: 'To feed the starving was militant. To ride into Jerusalem on a donkey's back was to be the leader of a political demonstration' (3. 497). Gandhi and Te Whiti provide powerful models of individuals who have inspired a radical rejection of worldly aspirations and values in favour of a life of simplicity dedicated to improving the lot of others. For

Baxter, the kind of uncompromising but peaceful militancy exhibited by Te Whiti is necessary 'to sow the seed of an alternate society' (3. 499).

The reference to Te Whiti points to Baxter's engagement with Māori spirituality and his call for the nurturing of a radical and liberating 'Maori Christianity', particularly evident in 'A Walking Stick for an Old Man' (3. 507). Russell Phillips writes that for Baxter God is found in 'the human community of all races and persons' (278). Baxter seeks to articulate and foster his vision of a church which 'exists for others beyond the confinement of any one dogma or belief. The identity of God is found in the community as opposed to the Church as a rigid and confined institution' (279).

One image from 'A Handbook for the Christian Militant' draws together the threads of my argument and is a fitting way to close. In section twenty-five of this guide to a reformed church Baxter retells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The victim in need of rescue is a drunk, 'lying in a Wellington street, with blood and vomit coming from his mouth'. Puritan society, Catholic society 'step over him and round him'. But one man 'takes him home and washes him and gives him his own bed to sleep in'. The Good Samaritan in Baxter's parable is 'a young man of homosexual temperament', and through this figure Baxter recasts the sins of the 'Sodomites' as a 'lack of the virtue of manuhiritanga, that is, the practice of mercy and respect to the guest and the stranger' (3. 493-94).

Here Baxter the prophet is very much in evidence, haranguing New Zealand society for its complacency and injustice and using his Samaritan to articulate his belief that salvation is to be found on the margins, with the misfits and troublemakers and radicals excluded from bourgeois society but embodying God's love. The narrative also highlights Baxter's eventual answer to the divisions and hypocrisies of Puritanism: kindness, compassion and love. The traces of both Puritan and anti-Puritan linger in his castigation of society, the rhetoric bearing a resemblance to Puritan indignation against a world that fails to measure up, and



the target of his diatribe being the hollow morality of a bigoted, racist, materialistic Puritan nation. But his late works suggest that, at least to some degree, he was able to transcend both the Puritan and anti-Puritan selves that lurked within to refashion himself as a prophet of freedom, mercy and justice.

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