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Louisa Alice Baker (1856-1926)

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Novelist.
Active 1876-1926 in New Zealand

Louisa Alice Baker was the first professional New Zealand woman novelist, publishing seventeen books between 1894 and 1913. Most of her fiction was set in the New Zealand she lived in from the ages of 7 to 38, but all of her novels were published in Britain and America where there was an appetite for colonial settings and where her preoccupation with marriage drew comparisons with Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand. Her choice of the pseudonym "Alien" speaks of her sense of dislocation from her New Zealand home and points to a moral feminist message that challenged patriarchal hierarchies.

Born on 13 January 1856 in the Warwickshire town of Aston in England, Louisa was the second of five children born to Elizabeth (née Bratt) and Henry Joseph Dawson. A carpenter by trade, Henry Dawson was also a part-time town missionary. The family came to New Zealand through the assisted immigration scheme in 1863 and settled in Christchurch, where Louisa was educated.

On 7 November 1874, at the age of eighteen, Louisa married John William Baker in St John's Anglican church in Christchurch. He was thirty-three years old, a house painter by profession and an amateur Greek scholar. The couple had two children: a son, John William Walter (known as Jack), born in 1875, and a daughter, Ethel Elizabeth, born in 1877. The marriage was unhappy, and in July 1886 Louisa left her husband and moved to Dunedin with her daughter, making regular trips to Christchurch to see her son. Louisa and John were never reconciled, although they did not divorce. John Baker died in Ashburton in 1916.

In Dunedin Louisa Baker began work for the illustrated weekly newspaper the *Otago Witness*. Baker transformed the children's page from an activity column to "an interactive forum for young readers and writers" (Rudig 30). Assuming the persona "Dot", Baker established "Dot's Little Folk Page" and invited children to write to her, promising that she would "never find any matter that interests the children too trivial to attend to" and hoping "before long to be regarded as their friend" ("Dot" 35). "Dot" was soon receiving correspondence from children throughout Otago. Keith Scott writes that "Dot" was so successful because Baker "managed to establish a special bond and dialogue with New Zealand's youth" (42). Such was the success of Baker's innovation that "Dot's Little Folk Page" became an institution in the *Otago Witness* and then in the *Otago Daily Times*, the title "Dot" long outliving her creator. In 1911 Baker recalled her time as "Dot" as "one of my pleasantest literary experiences" ("Felicitations from Great Britain" 14).

A similar revolution was initiated by Baker in relation to the ladies' page, which she gradually transformed from "the usual social notes and home hints to cautionary feminist advice for young women" (Coleman 55). Each

week Baker wrote a personal letter to readers, using the pseudonym "Alice". The need for a renovation in marital relations is a recurring theme. An early letter on "Young Wives" in the *Otago Witness* combines advice about the advantages of wifely support with an acknowledgment that this is wasted on "a brute or animal who merely regards a wife as a domestic drudge, without feelings of any kind" (32). Over the next few years "Alice's" letters demonstrate an increasingly militant feminism. In an 1893 letter, also in the *Otago Witness*, she praises dress reform and demands, "Why do men ask that women should sit in the shadow of their throne?" The letter calls on women to escape from the "chains" that keep them "slave[s]" in a domestic "prison" ("Alice's Letter to Her Readers" 45).

Baker also published several works of fiction in the *Otago Witness*, all under her pseudonym "Alice". These combine romance with an interest in moral and social issues. The serialised novel *Chalk* (1886-1887) critiques the abuse and neglect of children. *Fickle Jack* (1887) traces the moral improvement of the title character. The Christmas story "A Pearl of the Deep" (1886) explores the elevating power of literature and music and challenges the perception that sexual love outside of marriage necessitates shame.

Baker was active in the women's movement in both Dunedin and Christchurch. She was a signatory of the 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition and was present at the September 1893 meeting of the Canterbury Women's Institute Economic Committee when Kate Sheppard received a telegram informing her that women had finally won the franchise. The women at this meeting praised Baker's work for the *Otago Witness*, declaring that other papers needed to treat women as intellectual beings rather than as devotees of fashion and gossip (McCallum 27).

Baker's dream was to become a published novelist. She struggled to find a publisher in New Zealand and set sail for England in 1894. Her daughter Ethel accompanied her, but her son Jack remained in Christchurch, where he later married and became a bookseller. Baker never saw him again but wrote regularly and sent him copies of all her novels.

Baker's predicament was typical of the dilemma facing many creative artists in colonial New Zealand who struggled to get published locally. Helen Bones has done important work in challenging the mythology that New Zealand authors of this period had no option but to become expatriates, but acknowledges that "British publishers and readers were more accepting of [feminist novels] than the New Zealand public" (92). In 1903 Baker drew an analogy between sardines caught on England's East Coast and labelled as French and her own status as one of the "colonial artists … bred under the Southern Cross, held cheaply there – and labelled in London" ("The Sage" 404-05). Baker literally took on a new "label" for this new phase of her career, adopting the pseudonym "Alien".

Baker successfully secured Hutchinson as a publisher when she reached London. *A Daughter of the King* was published in 1894 in an elegant edition featuring a golden sun on the front cover and matching sunrays on the spine; the advertisement page in this first edition promised that it would "appeal especially to readers of 'The Story of an African Farm'".

A Daughter of the King establishes many of "Alien's" core preoccupations. The heroine is caught between her father's spiritual legacy of a loving God and the harsh puritanical faith of her adoptive mother. An unhappy sacrificial marriage triggers rebellion and flight before Florence finds solace in a Gospel of Love. Although Florence returns to bring succour to her dying husband, "Alien" advocates separation and divorce as a necessary end to an unloving relationship, which she regards as "respectable sin" (153). Florence is typical of "Alien's" heroines. Instinctively cultured and fiercely independent, she leaves the Canterbury environs that have nurtured her as a child for the artistic opportunities of Melbourne, where she becomes an acclaimed violinist.

"Alien's" writing style is, at times, melodramatic and there is a tension between her challenging feminist and theological ideas and her over-reliance on coincidence and sentimental set pieces such as death-bed

reconciliations. More innovative are her use of interior monologues, multi-perspective narrative voices, mystical dream sequences, and symbolic settings which transform the exoticized New Zealand backdrop of her narratives into metaphors of flux and faith.

A Daughter of the King was picked up by the Chicago publisher Neely, where it was published in 1894 with the subtitle "An Answer to 'The Story of an African Farm'". The novel was greeted with warmth by reviewers, particularly from the English religious press. A selection of "press opinions" about *A Daughter of the King*—reprinted on the first pages of her second novel *The Majesty of Man*—include recommendations from the *Christian World*, the *Methodist Reader*, the *Church Family Newspaper*, and the *Christian Leader*. The novel ran to three British editions within two years. New Zealand reactions were more equivocal. The *Otago Witness* praised "Alien's" "power, originality, and rich promise" ("Book Notice" 50), but *The Star* lamented that Florence had too much in common with Sarah Grand's "fin de siècle morality" and advised "Alien" to "avoid 'yellow-asterics' and 'problems'" ("Yellow Asterics from New Zealand" 4).

A Daughter of the King established the publishing pattern for "Alien's" subsequent novels. For the next two decades Baker produced virtually a novel a year. Hutchinson remained her publisher for her first five novels and then, after single volumes published first with Fisher Unwin and then with Constable, Digby Long became "Alien's" publishing home. There was less security in the American market; six novels found an American home but were published by five different companies. Baker felt that she had not "been at all generously treated as to [her] American rights" ("The New Zealand Novelist" 56). *The Untold Half* (1899) was her biggest success in America, with an "immense circulation" and a stage dramatization ("Alien's Successes" 81). Baker was constantly looking for avenues for publication and revenue, evident in her sale of the serial rights for *Another Woman's Territory* to the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* in 1900. In a 1902 interview Baker reflected, "rather bitterly", that there was "not much encouragement to write for colonial magazines. I have had a very different experience in England" ("The New Zealand Novelist" 56). She regularly published fiction in the British journals *The Girl's Realm*, the *Lady's Pictorial*, and *Household Words*.

"Alien's" first eight novels are all set in Australasia and revisit many of the themes present in *A Daughter of the King*. *The Majesty of Man* (1895) introduces a second type of protagonist, the reclusive and spiritually tortured male, and explores the nobility of loving atonement. Self-sacrifice, this time to expiate the sins of another, is also central to the goldfield's novel *In Golden Shackles* (1896). *The Majesty of Man* expands on "Alien's" vision of an ideal relationship: a marriage of equals in which physical love and intellectual compatibility provide joy and harmony. A celebration of passion over intellect underpins the Canterbury bildungsroman *Wheat in the Ear* (1898), although this novel also offers a powerful endorsement of female education. *The Untold Half* (1899), set in the spectacular landscape of the Lake Manapouri forest, is the only novel to deal with a sexual relationship outside of marriage, the heroine absolved of her moral transgression because she acted out of love: "some sins seem purer than other virtues and lift higher" (356). In contrast, *Another Woman's Territory* (1901)—for which Baker received a letter of "appreciation from Her Majesty Queen Alexandra"—asserts the sanctity of marriage and makes a connection between adultery and plagiarism ("The Editor and His Contributors" 424). *The Devil's Half Acre* (1900) and *Not In Fellowship* (1902) return to the theological issues of Baker's first novels, offering damning critiques of Calvinist theology.

Not in Fellowship was Baker's last New Zealand novel for five years. In a 1902 interview she spoke of her delight in "being acknowledged both in England and New Zealand as the New Zealand novelist". She spoke of her characters growing "spontaneously and naturally out of New Zealand soil", yet she was conscious of pressure to write for a British market, revealing that she had been "pressed … very strongly" by her publishers "to write an English novel for them" ("The New Zealand Novelist" 56). She had collaborated with the British novelist Rita (Eliza Margaret Jane Humphreys) in 1899, co-writing the English-set *Looking-Glass Hours*. After 1902 Baker increasingly turned to English settings for inspiration, declaring in a 1903 letter to the editor of the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* that "a story with an English setting is three times the value in London, commercially, of

one with a colonial background" ("The Sage" 67).

"Alien's" five novels and one short story collection with an English setting offer a conventional blend of romance and melodrama. Some of the standard Baker moral themes are present—renunciation of a great love in *Over the Barriers* (1903), the virtues of female independence and the evils of class division in *A Slum Heroine* (1904), the compensations of artistic creation in *An Unread Letter* (1909), and redemption through suffering in *A Double Blindness* (1910)—but they are always secondary to the demands of the romantic narrative.

Baker reverted to a New Zealand setting in two later novels. This reengagement with New Zealand was coupled with a return to complex moral issues. *In His Neighbour's Landmark* (1907) all the standard Baker tropes re-emerge: the reclusive male in need of redemption, the instinctively cultured, independent woman, the relinquishment of self-interest out of love, the freedom offered by "the boundless space and the blue vaults of the Southern Cross", the nurturing possibilities of the bush, and the need for artistic talent (in this instance an operatic voice) to be developed in England (2). Baker's moral feminism is particularly evident in *The Perfect Union* (1908), with the heroine contemplating a free love union before realising that this would be "a sin against her womanhood" (183).

The Perfect Union was attacked by New Zealand critics as belonging to a class of "decadent books" in which "evil" is "wrapped up in high-flown language" ("New Publications" 13). In an earlier essay on "Colonials in Fiction" (1903), fellow novelist Clara Cheeseman praised Baker's "telling descriptions of the New Zealand scenery", but eviscerated "'Alien's' novels" for being filled with "regrettable incidents" and for being peopled with "inconsistent" characters who bear no resemblance to "New Zealand men and women moving on their accustomed ways" (279). Other New Zealand assessments of "Alien's" fiction were positive. In 1896 the *Otago Witness* reported that 1,000 copies of *The Majesty of Man* had been ordered for the New Zealand market ("Anglo-Colonial Notes" 54), and in 1902 H.J. Lewis hailed Baker as a "Colonial 'George Eliot'" whose work embodied the dawn of "a genuine colonial literature" (51).

Baker had continued her connection with the *Otago Witness* after her relocation to Britain, with the serialisation of an original novel *A Child of the Pakehas* in 1898 and the contribution of a weekly column, "Alice's Letter from England", from 1903. She also worked as a reader for a London publishing house. Ill-health prevented her from living permanently in London and she spent time in Bournemouth before settling at Britannia Cottage in Deal, Kent, close to the home of her daughter Ethel, who had married Englishman George Felix Edgar. Baker died on 22 March 1926 after suffering severe burns while extinguishing a fire from a portable oil stove. At the time of her death fourteen of Baker's novels were on display at the 1925-1926 South Seas International Exhibition in Dunedin.

Baker was packaged as a "women's novelist" by early critics writing about the New Zealand novel. Elizabeth M. Smith complained in 1938 that Baker's books focused on "a succession of women, always in the right and always self-sacrificing" (47), while in 1966 Joan Stevens paid tribute to Baker's "particular mixture of religious appeal, sex appeal, and championship of women's rights [that] made her one of the top novelists of her time" (28). Terry Sturm pointed to "the renovation of the institution of marriage" as Baker's "central fictional subject" (498) in 1991, and her connection to the women's movement has been profiled by Aorewa McLeod and Heather Roberts. Recent reassessments of Baker's fiction by Kirby-Jane Hallum and Kirstine Moffat have pointed to her feminist message, theological engagement, symbolic use of music, and colonial aesthetic. Baker's literary foundation as a journalist has received attention from Stefanie Rudig, and Helen Burns assesses Baker as an example of the complex identity of expatriate colonial authors who continued to be inspired by New Zealand settings and subjects.

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