**Love and Sacrifice in Louisa Baker's Fiction [slide]**

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 and morality drew comparisons with Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand. Her choice of the pseudonym "Alien" is suggestive of a profound sense of dislocation from her New Zealand home and points to a moral message that challenged patriarchal hierarchies. **[slide]** But the one occasion where Baker uses the term 'alien' in her fiction relates to a Calvinist church service where those 'not in fellowship' are requested to sit 'behind the board'.[1] The heroine of *Not in Fellowship* is 'saddened by the sense of alienship forced upon her; it was harsh, it had a disagreeable effect, suggesting pitiful restriction and limit in contrast to…individual charity'[2]

**[slide]** Baker has received attention from myself and other literary scholars such as Heather Roberts, Aowera McLeod, and Kirby-Jane Hallum as a New Woman author whose fiction speaks of the need for female education and autonomy.[3] This paper seeks to illuminate an overlooked, but just as crucial aspect of Baker's work, her complex theology, particularly in relation to the recurring

motifs of grace and renunciation. As the previous quote from *Not in Fellowship* underscores, Baker takes issue with aspects of Protestant theology, particularly the doctrines of predestination and retribution, and critiques church practices which seek to separate, punish, or exclude. Her heroes and heroines articulate a Gospel of Love which demands both forgiveness and self-sacrifice of the believer. Renunciation flowing from love is presented as the highest spiritual virtue, while repression and self-abnegation emerging from guilt is castigated.

Before turning to the themes of sacrifice and love in Baker's fiction I want to introduce you to a woman **[slide]** whose life and fiction has fascinated me since I first read her novels in the reading room of the Alexander Turnbull Library one Wellington winter when I was doing my PhD.

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 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, but the marriage was unhappy, and in July 1886 Louisa left her husband and moved to Dunedin with

her daughter Ethel, making regular trips to Christchurch to see her son Jack. **[slide]**

In Dunedin Louisa Baker began work for the illustrated weekly newspaper the *Otago Witness*, establishing "Dot's Little Folk Page" for children and transforming the ladies' page from "the usual social notes and home hints to cautionary feminist advice for young women" penned by another of her pseudonym's "Alice".[4] **[slide]** Baker was active in the women's movement. 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 when Kate Sheppard received a telegram informing her that women had won the franchise.[5]

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. **[slide]** She found considerable success as a novelist with many of her novels running to several editions in Britain and six of her novels also published in America.[6] 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. 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.[7]

**[slide]** Several reviews of Baker's fiction hailed her as a 'Colonial George Eliot'.[8] While this is not an ideal comparison in terms of literary skill and control, it does point to Baker's desire to explore serious moral, philosophical, and religious questions through the medium of literature. Protestant theology is a central preoccupation and Baker's attitude to this subject is best described as ambivalent. She is vehemently opposed to Calvinist doctrine **[slide]**, which is depicted in her fiction as retributive, divisive, negative, and austere. But she attacks this restricting theology not by jettisoning faith, but by contrasting Calvinist doctrine to her ideal religion of love and forgiveness. Baker labels the theology she critiques as Puritan and Calvinist. Her ideal faith is also given a name, in this instance a less precise theological term: The Gospel of Love, that seems to be associated with Methodism and Anglicanism.

Baker detested the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and her critique is showcased in her 1902 novel *Not in Fellowship*. This explores both the personal cost of Calvinism and the corporate cost to believers. Frances Marlow, who comes to Akaroa **[slide]** to stay with her uncle, is appalled at the narrowness of Mark Hathaway's convictions and the austerity of the services he leads. Mark Hathaway is a good man whose desire is the serve others, but his faith is an 'abstraction': 'his method was narrow; his creed a simple rigid formula' (25). This restricting, soulless theology and deliberate 'crucifying [of] the flesh' is the result of an early fall from grace at the gaming tables of Monte Carlo (33).

Believing himself to be a ‘spiritual castaway,’ Hathaway devotes himself to mortifying himself and saving others from similar errors (91). The services he leads mirror his absolutist beliefs. The ‘saints’ gather in a hall devoid of ornaments, sit on bare benches, and wear sombre clothes (31). A board halfway down the hall divides the elect from the unelect. It reads ‘Those not in fellowship please sit behind the board’. In a 1902 interview, Baker revealed that the genesis of her novel came from seeing this inscription ‘on entering a meeting-house’.[9]

Frances is an agent for change. Her love for her uncle softens and redirects him. He acknowledges that his life and thinking is barren’ and that is ‘moulding him. She loved him and his heart had starved’ (81). In a similar way Frances breaks the cold atmosphere of the service. At first she is merely repelled by this ‘measuring out of the Almighty to souls’ (21). Frances believes that ‘each soul may claim the right of divine kinship’ and she longs to escape from the hall into the ‘light, warmth, harmony, colour, motion’ that she sees through the window (21). However, this desire to flee gives way to a determination to impart some of her joy and consciousness of God’s love to the saints. **[slide]** She sings ‘There is a Green Hill Far Away’ and ‘The dreariness of the little hall was forgotten, limitations fell away. The small assembly … was lifted from finite restrictions and put in touch with the infinite’ (22).

Baker underlines her belief that the Calvinist creed and method of worship is inhibiting and divisive by contrasting it to the servicers conducted by Wilfrid Leigh. In contrast to Hathaway's pessimism, the hallmark of Leigh's character is a 'passionate optimism that all would yet be well with the world' (202). In Leigh's church everyone is welcome and a sign reads 'All seats free' (236). **[slide]** His creed is 'The Lord our God hath long mercies and forgiveness' and although he works in the Melbourne slums and opium dens he 'believe[s] that all men reach divinity' (237, 249). Forgiveness rather than damnation, unity rather than separatism, and the Gospel of Love rather than Calvinism, these are the contrasts Baker draws.

Baker is just as strong in her antagonism towards the Calvinist view of a retributive God **[slide]** as she is to the arbitrary God of predestination. Her God certainly hates sin and desires humanity to be like him, but for Baker, God's response to sin is forgiveness not punishment. This belief is powerfully articulated in her 1900 novel *The Devil's Half-Acre*.[10] John Jermyn, 'The Prophet,' is a Calvinist fire and brimstone preacher who sees the Otago mining community **[slide]** he serves as a modern Sodom or Gomorrah 'reeking of sin' (1). Jermyn has dedicated his life to the 'redemption of this corner of the Devil's vineyard' (21). His revival meetings seek to instil fear into his congregation, fear of a God who 'demands tooth for tooth; life for life!' (44)

The song his daughter Rose sings at the opening revival captures something of his outlook: **[slide]**

Oh to be nothing! Nothing!

Only to lie at His feet,

An empty and broken vessel.' (p. 10)

Jermyn denies Rose all forms of entertainment, including playing the piano, declaring 'pleasure and this house are irreconcilable … "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord!"' (21) Rose's plea for pretty clothes results in a similar response: 'the lust of the flesh! … Girl would you drag men down into hell?' (17) Just as the keynote of his sermons is fear, his aim is to foster in Rose 'fear of joy, fear of love, fear of what passion cants entertainment – better a place without gladness and merriment, than an after-seeking with tears for a place of repentance, finding no place' (45).

Once again, Baker contrasts the retributive creed of her anti-hero with the forgiveness and love articulated by pastor Holmes Hardcastle. **[slide]** His son identifies him with the father in the parable of the prodigal son and the keynote of Hardcastle's character and his God are summed up in his words: 'I am not judge – I am an advocate for mercy' (238). Like the father of the prodigal son, he declares in a sermon, God calls sinners to 'Come Home!" and be 'born

anew,' (239-41). Hearing this sermon John Jermyn finally realises that mercy, not damnation is God's promise.

Even as Baker critiques the repressiveness and separateness of Calvinist teaching, she acknowledges its integrity and moral rectitude. She admires the involvement of believers such as John Jermyn and Mark Hathaway in social and humanitarian work, although she suggests that love rather than duty needs to be the motivating force. Her Calvinist characters must learn to let warmth and colour into their repressed lives – to be less self-denying. Yet her heroines, typically agents of change, are frequently forced to make a sacrifice during the course of the novel. This chosen renunciation is lauded by Baker as replicating Christ's sacrificial death. **[slide]**

Rose, in *The Devil's Half Acre* chooses this kind of loving sacrifice. Rather than being demanded by a retributive God, her relinquishment of self-interest is made in an attempt to bring comfort to the suffering and to redeem others. Rose rebels against the narrow tenets of John Jermyn. Her one goal is to escape from Jermyn's 'curbing hand, thwarting her desires, training her up in a way she had no desire to go – in the paths of negation and godliness' (4-5). Yet, when the man she loves appears to be a murderer, she resolves to be an atonement for his sin that he might be saved and his victim's father comforted: 'only a great love would want to pay for another – a free-will offering' (p. 54).

Baker's novels are suffused with her moral vision and she also demands of her heroines sacrifice when they are tempted to contravene the moral code relating to sex outside of marriage **[slide]**. Alma, the heroine of the 1908 novel *The Perfect Union* wrestles for much of the novel with a moral dilemma: is she justified in becoming the lover of the man she loves? He refuses to shackle her because his first wife rebelled against her bonds. She eventually comes to a realisation that to yield would be a wrong 'against the State, against society, against, not herself alone, but all womankind' (184). She would either 'doom herself to childlessness, or sin irrevocably against her children' (184). Alma tells her lover that she knew 'the puritan was lying in wait in my nature to stone unsanctioned joy' (251). Here, the puritan part of the self is applauded as guarding against an excess of passion.

It is here that Baker's theology and feminism merge. **[slide]** Her feminism is very much the moral feminism of her time and her fiction endorses marriage and motherhood as the ultimate vocation for women, offering love in a human form that echoes divine love. This is highlighted in Baker's 1895 novel *The Majesty of Man*.[11] The heroine, Sister Lilian is a good and noble woman who founds the White House in Melbourne, a refuge for the weak and poor. Her life is dedicated to the alleviation of pain and the redemption of souls. The Order of the White Cross is accessible to all. Lilian seeks to 'build a bridge so that sinner and saint may cross and re-cross', the sinner to salvation and the saint to help

those struggling (59). Her view of redemption is a state where sin is ‘blot[ted] out’ (60).

This far she epitomises Baker’s Gospel of Love, but she is critiqued for her implacable devotion to chastity. This denial of sexual feeling is challenged by her disciple St John who declares that ‘love alone makes it possible to realise our humanity, and to pass from the passive to the active understanding of God’ (249-50). Ultimately Lilian comes to a similar revelation, declaring that celibacy is in ‘defiance of God’s law’ (177). She dies rocking St John’s child in her arms in an outburst of all … pent-up mother love’ (342).

Baker’s message appears to be clear: self-abnegation in an attempt to propriate God is wrong. Sacrifice to a moral code or out of a desire to redeem someone else is lauded. Yet there is one sacrifice that she insists her heroine’s resist [**slide]**: that of submitting to the will of a man, be that man a father or a husband. Baker’s first novel, *A Daughter of the King* is something of a manifesto in this regard. The heroine, Florence, who is trapped into a loveless marriage, leaves her husband and obtains a divorce. She is comfortable doing this because her marriage is a distortion of what a true union should be: ‘Two who were … one would draw each other, lift, ennoble, enrich, teach each other. There would be no question of conquest, no sense of sacrifice or encroachment’ (156-7). Her husband Claude recites Paul’s injunction: ‘wives, submit

yourselves unto your own husbands and unto the Lord'. To which Florence replies with a declaration of female autonomy: 'The true wife is not a mere puppet, pulled by strings, jumping high or jumping low as the whim of the puller may dictate' (155-6).

**[slide]** I have always liked Baker's complexity as an early feminist. She holds up marriage as an ideal, but advocates separation and divorce when love and partnership is lacking. She believes that marriage is the place for the expression of physical love, but claims passion and physical satisfaction as the birth right of her heroines. A similar complexity is evident in her engagement with theology, particularly the theme of sacrifice. She vehemently repudiates the Calvinist perception of God as a repressive figure who demands denial from believers and takes her heroes and heroines on a journey to discover love and forgiveness. Yet she also views a sacrifice made out of love or in order to uphold a moral code as noble and a replication of Christ's atonement for the sins of humanity. I would like to end with two quotes which encapsulate the two core principles of Baker's theology:

'…true to the impulse of progression, life demanded of her something greater than her ideal accomplishment – relinquishment.' (Frances, *Not in Fellowship*, p. 133)

'I think more love and less religion would save you.' (Rose: *The Devil's Half-Acre*, p. 86)

[1] *Not in Fellowship,* (London: Digby, Long, 1902), p. 20.
[2] *Not in Fellowship,* p. 21.
[3] Hallum, Kirby-Jane. "The Antipodal Home Beautiful: Louisa Alice Baker's Colonial Aesthetic." *Domestic Fiction in Colonial Australia and New Zealand*. Ed. Tamara S. Wagner. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014. 135-44; Hallum, Kirby-Jane, "The New Zealand New Woman: Translating a British Cultural Figure to a Colonial Context." *Literature Compass* 11.5 (2014): 328-36; McLeod, Aowera. "Aliens: Two New Zealand Novelists of the First Women's Movement." *Women's Studies Conference Papers* 1989. Ed. Clare Simpson. Auckland: Women's Studies Association, 1990. 35-43; Moffat, Kirstine. "'Devoted to the Cause of Woman's Rights': The New Zealand New Woman Novel." Women's Writing 26.3 (2017): 304-27; Roberts, Heather. Where Did She Come From? New Zealand Women Novelists 1862-1987. Auckland: Allen & Unwin, 1989.
[4] Coleman, Jenny. "Writing for the Ladies: Women Journalists in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century New Zealand." *Communication Journal of New Zealand* 8.2 (2007): 51-62, p. 55.
[5] McCallum, Janet. "Baker. Louisa Alice." *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 3 – 1901-1920*. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1996. 27-28, p. 27.
[6] 'It is with great pleasure that I am able to record Mrs. Baker's continued and increasing success. She has indeed worked hard for it. If people imagine that she can turn out her books as if ground out of a machine they make a grievous mistake. I know that Mrs. Baker's novels cost her an immensity of hard thought and hard work. She well deserved all the success she has obtained hitherto, and may attain in the future.' 'Personal Notes from London,' *New Zealand Herald*, 26 January 1903, p. 6.
[7] "Novelist's Tragic End." *Evening Post* 17 May 1926: 7.
[8] Lewis, Rev. H. J. "Special Article: A Colonial 'George Eliot.'" *New Zealand Mail* 8 January 1902: 51
[9] 'The New Zealand Novelist, A Chat with "Alien"', *New Zealand Herald*, 7 June 1902, p. 5 (Supplement).
[10] *The Devil's Half-Acre* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1900)
[11] *The Majesty of Man* (London: Hutchinson, 1895)