

Poems of
Archibald Baxter

Edited by
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Introduction

Famous for his stance as a conscientious objector during the First World War, Archibald Baxter is arguably one of the best-known figures of New Zealand history. His fame stems from his own actions, but also from those of his youngest son – James K. Baxter is one of New Zealand’s most lauded poets. In the Baxter family, all the poetic focus has been on James which, given his talent and his extremely prolific work ethic, is entirely understandable. But James wasn’t the only bard in the family – his father was a poet too.

When taking on an internship at the Hocken Library, my task was to create an index of all 28 of James’ poetry notebooks. Starting at the age of eleven, James wrote down each and every poem he composed into his notebooks, and he did so until his death in 1972. Baxter’s notebooks are well known among New Zealand literary scholarship and are a treasure trove of never-before-seen poems – especially in the early volumes. But you can imagine my surprise when, among his own works, I found that James had copied a selection of poetry written by his father, Archibald. This was how I first encountered Archibald’s poetry and, thinking I’d stumbled upon something special, I kept my eyes peeled for more. As I soon discovered, Archibald’s work has been sprinkled throughout James’ notebooks, and the more of his work I found, the more interested in it I became. When it turned out I was far from the only one interested in these long-forgotten works, the plan to publish them was set in motion.

Archibald’s poems are simple but effective in both language and theme. He writes about a wide variety of topics, ranging from his pacifist beliefs to his irritation about the gorse that plagues New Zealand farmers. Those who have read and

commented on his work deride it as simplistic and lacking in skill, and critics have noted that Archie's work "is not of high technical merit – hence its continued unpublished state" (Johnston, 51). There is truth in what they say, but, regardless of quality, the fascinating existence of these poems and the reputation of their author warrants interest.

The following thirteen poems are the results of my scouring through James' notebooks and Archibald's personal papers, held in the Hocken Library, Dunedin. It is possible that these weren't Archibald's only efforts, but given the haphazard nature of his papers and the unsigned poetry contained within them, it is hard to tell what is and isn't from Archibald's pen. The poems included in this collection are the only ones that can be definitively credited to Archibald, either because he signed them himself or because they were marked as such by James. The only exception to this rule is the poem *In December Days*, which has evidence both for and against it being written by Archibald, but I have included the piece for the sake of interest. The conflicting evidence regarding this poem is discussed in the notes on the text, which can be found at the end of this collection. These notes contain both my own analysis of each poem as well as any factual information that applies to them. Throughout these notes I refer to *'The Poetry and Prose of Archibald and James K. Baxter: Like Father, Like Son?'*, a master's thesis by Jennifer C. Johnston which discusses Archibald's poetry in depth and was very helpful in my own research. This thesis can be easily found online, and I highly recommend reading it in conjunction with this collection. The original manuscripts are littered with spelling and grammatical oddities, and I have taken the liberty of correcting these for the sake of readability.

- Caitlin Duff, 2021

Part 1:
New Zealand

*To the Chairman and Members of the Taieri Country Council on a
“Vexed Question”*

I am a son of honest toil
These many years I've turned the soil
Have fought the fight and took the spoil
These hills afford
And oft tho' I did sorely broil
I've mostly scored

In all these gullies I've made bridges
From great trees split by maul and wedges
I've mowed the fern from off the ridges
To get pig-bedding
And with great care have nurtured hedges
Around my steading

My sheds I've built with greatest pains,
And laid them off with paths and drains –
They're roofed with thatch and native cains
Well laced with flax
To shield my stock and keep the rain
From off their backs

But woe is me my fate is hard
For all my toil here's my reward,
Right through the cowshed in my yard
A full chain broad –
My foes agree with one accord
To make a road.

Alas! alas! when rogues combine,
Their tricks was mortal can divine?
Each artful dodge and dark design
Is past deduction.
And these have planned 'gainst me and mine
For our destruction

So cursed be all the clan McCreman
Who paint me blacker than a demon
They may confer with Hay and Freeman
And beat me too
But though I swing as high as Hayman
They'll deeply rue.

May all the plagues of earth attend them
My fortune ne'er in life befriend them
Nor one day's joy nor pleasure lend
them Among good fellows,

And may the law in justice end them
Upon the gallows.

But I've a friend down in the Taieri
Where hill-bred colts grow fat and firey,
A grizzled Scotchman tough and wiry,
And Staunch and sure,
And though his stockyard may be miry
His heart is pure.

Tho' no one else bemoans my plight
Yet Wattie knows their craft and
spite. Hail Wattie many a hearty night
We'll drown our cares;
But may Quld Erin's banshee blight
Both them and theirs.

Hail Rock and Pillar Thou

Hail Rock and Pillar thou
Who high against the blast
Dost set thy fearless brow
So oft with clouds o'er cast

To sing of thee I call
On no inspiring elf
For why thou after all
Art something like myself

Thy heart like mine was rent
And torn, and still tis full
But here we're different Thy
head is mighty cool.

Gorse

Gorse, gorse, gorse, gorse,
Shelter of rabbit, cow and horse,
Of great annoyance to farmers a source
When inspectors come round and compel them by force
On the shortest of notice to clear all their gorse.

Furze, furze, furze, furze,
To clear it the farmer is always averse,
For he has to leave work that puts coin in his purse
And he cannot buy bread with gold on the furze:
Both furze and inspectors to him are a curse.

Whins, whins, whins, whins,
Beautiful blossoms on needles and pins:
'Tis the man on the mattock that pays for his sins:
If the men who make laws had their knuckles and shins
All bloody with spikes, they'd know something of whins.

Part II:
Literary Tributes

The Vision

At Jimmie's hut we all had met
The night was wintry wild and wet
But what cared we about the weather
They knew when thus we met-together
An extempore from Charley's lyre
Could rouse a grand poetic fire
For Charley, when in proper tune
Could be a poet or buffoon
A master he, in either art
Could shake the sides or melt the heart –
With songs of love could move a tear
Or could with sulphur scorch the ear
He was, not wished he to be more
The leading spirit of the core.
But on the night in question he
Was worked up to his highest key
So were we all as there with heart and soul
We did the flights of Byron's muse extol
Praised Robby Burns with fellow feeling true
Revelled in Hood, and William Shakespeare too.
Our favourite bards received our loud applause
And friendship glowed despising man-made laws
That regulate the hours when men shall meet
And part, if they are to be deemed discreet

By those who are too prudent ever to know
Those powers that must uninterrupted flow,
And so the social hours went rolling on
Until the 'wee short hour' was all but gone
When Hugh at last, arose mid plaudits loud
To give us Shelley's poem on The Cloud
In his best style the piece he did deliver
Now soaring high now flowing like a river
But at the last line when about to cheer
We each beheld a gleaming form appear
A phantom shape, which rose and seemed to glow
And on those eyes, we could not help but know
All recognise, as full his face he turns
'Auld Scotland's bard' the immortal Robbie Burns

He seemed unto our company quite used
Bowed and shook hands then took himself a seat
Jim offered him a beer but he refused
So next he offered him a whisky neat
Which he declined and said "I've ne'er been boozed
On earthly drink, nor tasted earthly meat,
Now friend I think our comrades you've amused
I pray you press no farther on this beat'.
To which Jim curled his lips and gave a curse
And said 'If you are Burns you've altered for the worse'

The sprite seemed nothing daunted by this volley
His face looked grave and just a trifle colder He
said "My friend I think you'll rue your folly And
deeply too, before you are much older, And take
your drop alone." Then smiling drolly His face
was changed to each amazed beholder There sat
Tom Hood the punster gay and jolly I knew his
finely moulded head and shoulder Then as we
gazed in wonder past expression Our favourite
bards appeared in quick succession

For one brief moment only, each appeared
Yet wondrous things were written on their faces –
Deep things, which until then had not been cleared
Unto our minds did now seem as a place is –
In which a man in early life is reared
(But excited from for long 'mong foreign races)
Familiar, and by absence more endeared.
As once again he visits and retraces
The haunts and happy scenes his childhood knew
And sees it all like some fair dream that has come true
Fear left us now for there was naught appalling
In this strange vision of departed souls
Goldsmith was clear his smiles like moonbeams falling
And Shelley like a meteor of the poles

Shakespeare, serene, deep, dreamy and enthralling
And Byron like the sunset burning coals
That cast their glow on infant rivers sprawling
Or gild the rocks and cliffs where ocean rolls.
Our hearts rejoiced now we inly knew
To be and feel, is higher than to strive to do
The sprites were gone that late has passed before us
No; somewhere near they still seemed hovering
At times beneath, at times high-floating o'er us
On sweeping sound on softly waving wing
Then stole upon our ears a sweeter chorus
Than lips of clay as yet have been learned to sing
And we were sure they did not quite ignore us
Else we had never heard such music sing.
I can't translate the song; - its meaning here
I give, as unto me it strangely did appear.

Burns

How great is he who can a nation sway!
Or all the nations of the world as one
Illume, yea to each comer shed a ray;
Whose brilliance likes the glory of the sun
All lesser lights beholding fade away
Nor shine again till his bright course is run:
To such a man a tribute would I pay –
To Robert Burns; and well we know that none
Of Scotland's sons of genius with all their arts
Him touched like him the finest chords of human hearts.

His living lyre to nature ever true
Awakes such echoes in the hearts of men
As bid their souls aspire to dare and do
And nobly play their part in life: and when
To love he tuned its strings how well he knew
The master touch; and to the pure refrain
All nature gives her harmony and hue,
And Poesy bonds with her golden chain
The goodly sheaf of love 'twas hers to reap
And with the name of Burns for evermore to keep.

Part III:
Pacifism and War

Loud Calls the Voice of Reason

Loud calls the voice of Reason

“Awake! O earth awake!”

But though the mountains shake

Deep-rooted stands the treason,

The tyranny and wrong

Of man against Mankind

The millions still are blind

Pride, Avarice, Ambition,

Have plunged the world in war

And writ their names in gore;

Darkness and superstition,

The horrors of the Past

No blacker page reveal

With wounds no balm can heal

But through the orient portals

The world's true conqueror comes

Without the beat of drums –

“Peace and Goodwill to mortals!”

The message was of old,

Is now, and still shall be

Till all Mankind are free.

O My Brothers

O my brothers! O my brothers!

Will ye be for ever slaves? –

See your fathers and your mothers

Sinking down into their graves

Ground by toil and crushed by sorrow

While the flag of Mammon* waves!

Ever shall out sons and daughters

Through the flame to Moloch* go Till

the Voices of many waters

Rending heavens thunders “No!”

And the War-God writhes and shudders

At his final overthrow!

Song of the Shirker

I was born right here in Otago

And I'm not going to Libya to fight

For the capital of England is Chicago –

So goodnight, New Zealand, goodnight!

It's goodbye to the country of the Worker

For I'm heading for the Great Australian Bight

Where every man's a coward and a shirker –

So goodnight, New Zealand, goodnight!

I've no desire to lose my legs in battle

There's a skipper on the West Coast tonight

Leaving here with a boat load of cattle

So goodnight, New Zealand, goodnight!

The Americans are coming down to Burnham

While at Tripoli we're fighting for the

Right: If the Japs get to 'Frisco it'll learn 'em –

So goodnight, New Zealand, goodnight!

There's some stay at home to be taken

There's some in the bush out of sight

But I'm right out to save my bacon –

So goodnight, New Zealand, goodnight!

Simons Town

Once more towards the western sea
The glorious sun goes down Once
more he fires the granite spires That
look o'er Simons Town I watched
him when at break of day He rose
with blood-red plume With shafts
of light on many a height He smote
the shades of gloom Where far and
wide on every side The heath and
heather blooms

The feathered tribes in bush and brake
Their gladsome matins sang;
The wings unfurled the insect world,
To animation sprang:
The shores in magic beauty smiled
Lit by his mantling rays,
From hill to strand a fairy land
Gleamed through a pearly haze:
The Gorgeous bay like sapphire lay
Serene beneath his blaze

The shrubs that to the water's edge

In such profusion grow –
A wonderous sheen of ever-green
All bathed in his bright glow
Wild flowers of every shade and hue
Like gems in lustre shone
From scarlet bright to snowy white
But now, the day is done
And now that sun my thoughts outrun
My fancy far has flown

Back to the land that gave me birth
Far out across the foam
A land that lies 'neath southern skies
My far New Zealand home
To where through gleaming flax and fern
The summer breezes stray
Where oft I've stood in raptest mood
Or onward held my way
Thro' woodland halls where water-falls
Leap down the showering spray

There on the morning stillness breaks
The blithesome tui's song
From lofty pines and high woodbines
In music rich and strong

While to the bellbird's joyful notes
Each wooded bluff responds: And
fantails wing and robins sing
Around the woodland ponds
Where wild ducks shy in covert lie
And tree-ferns wave their fronds

Part IV:
The Universe

Spirits of Harmony, Music, and Love

In the elemental chaos
When the worlds were in the making
None could rule or disobey us –
We were there in all partaking;
And we caught the rhythmic motion
Of the orbs that roll and swing
In the vast ethereal ocean
Deep beyond all fathoming

And our music rolled over the waters before
Their free-swelling billows were barred by a shore,
And we sand as we saw the earth leap from the main
And the plan of Creation before us made plain.

But it was our delight, when the earth in the pride
Of her sweet virgin beauty, in us did confide –
 Then we rustled and played
 Through her forests, and swayed
All the reeds and brackens bade them rejoice;
 And the birds in their flight
 When the sunshine was bright
Caught the sound of our music and each found a voice

Great Universe, How Vast

Great universe, how vast

The fashion of thy spheres;

What know we of thy past

Or future countless years?

How shall we understand

Who measure space by miles

The wonder-moving Hand

That lit those awful piles?

In their eternal sweep,

Thy worlds of flood or flame

In murmur music-deep

All whisper one great Name.

Thou mortal frame, and frail

Dust off this earthen shell

Here make – thou canst not fail

– Thy heaven or thy hell.

O drowsy soul awake!

Breathe deep of Heaven's breath,

Of that true life partake

So live and fear not death

Death/The Watcher

Men call me sorrow, yet I am not sad;
I have no pain yet know not to be glad;
I'm sought though feared by all beneath the sun;
All seek my house although I visit none

I see Mankind oft stand without my walls –
With hanging heads from kingly courts they come;
They enter in to tread my gloomy halls:
They share my all, to thank me all are dumb

Who drains my cup unto its dregs may know
The highest raptures unto mortals given –
My finger strikes the note of deepest woe But
points the soul to all the joys of heaven

In December Days

Now the year is near her ending
By inch and hour she stalks her doom
In grip of sea her ice is bending
She breaks to drift a melting tomb.

Stress of névé now is over
Strain and press of ice-bound ridges,
Grind and grate of grief is over Clear
the course for whiter pledges.

Defiled moraine our deeds are torn
Rolled from lofty summit beauty,
Eyes to peaks repentant turn
Resplendent in dolomite duty.

The tiny breather here afforded
Must not, oh not be wasted!
Spartan douche must wash the sordid
With holding tack resolves be basted,

For wrath is lurking under hedges The
lightning of its animosity lashed, Peers
in gloat from investment ledgers Its
biding avalanche-bolsters massed.

Time to carve out ough! the tumours
Cast off clutched-at pamper props
Drain the seeped-up soothing humours
Held in the bole-base – or the whole tree rots.

Yes, we know it's a calendar convention
To show we know the astronomic fact,
But the significance lies in the conjunction –
Earth knows, would we, a charted track.

Notes on the Text

To the Chairman and Members of the Taieri Country Council on a “Vexed Question”

Baxter’s reputation as a conscientious objector and the father of James K. Baxter precedes him, but it’s easy to forget that, at his core, he was a simple New Zealand farmer. This background is especially apparent in the following poem, which he starts by referencing his experience as a “son of honest toil”. Johnston highlights the piece as having a distinct “New Zealand setting” (Johnston, 42), and it’s hard to argue with her – this poem could not have originated from any other country in the world.

Hail Rock and Pillar Thou

In *Hail Rock and Pillar Thou*, Baxter compares himself to the titular mountain range, and is inspired by the Rock and Pillar Range of the Otago region. Both have seen torment, Baxter the trauma of his World War One experience, the Range the battering of natural forces. But unlike the Range, Baxter’s torment spurred him on into political action, while the Range remains “mighty cool.”

Gorse

Like *Taieri Country Council*, *Gorse* is a poem which speaks to Baxter’s experience as a farmer. His complaints of the gorse that plagues farmers all over coincide with his complaints of the inspectors who ask them to clear it – presumably city men who don’t understand the priorities of farm workers. Furze and whins, which Baxter also refers to, are alternate names for gorse. The use of these alternate names allows Baxter to play around with various rhymes throughout the poem. The final verse is rather pointed in this regard, as Baxter has a humorous jab at the inspectors’ lack of understanding of what it’s like to remove those pesky plants. So, while it perhaps lacks the gravitas of the later works in this collection, it is still a fairly amusing read.

The Vision

The Vision, one of Baxter's longer poems, is a show of appreciation to the poets he admired. The poem describes a meeting among friends which is visited by the spirits of long dead poets such as Robbie Burns, William Shakespeare, and Percy Shelley, among others. But the appearance of these poets is not the only element of Baxter's tribute to them. According to Johnston, *The Vision* draws much of its inspiration from Burns' poem *Tam o' Shanter*, and in doing this he replicates Burns' own habit of using "existing poems or folk-stories, either written or oral, and incorporating them into his own work" (Johnston, 34). This is a multi-layered tribute, and certainly one worth reading.

Burns

As the title suggests, *Burns* is Baxter's ultimate tribute to the well-known Scottish bard. While *The Vision* also includes references to Robbie Burns, he was merely one of many poets who appeared to the meeting of friends – but in *Burns*, he takes centre stage. In her interview with Terrance Baxter, Archibald's eldest son, Johnston discovered that Baxter's appreciation for Burns was serious and long lasting, and according to Johnston "he quoted "Tam o' Shanter" so often to his sons that James claimed he knew it by heart by the time he was six years old" (Johnston, 30). So, with this longstanding affection in mind, the tribute seems inevitable.

Loud Calls the Voice of Reason

Loud Calls the Voice of Reason is overtly influenced by Baxter's pacifism. The titular voice of reason is the pacifist voice, desperately reaching out to a world that may be too corrupted by war and violence to be saved. However, the voice of reason persists and keeps on calling until "all Mankind are free", much like Baxter himself, who held out against inhumane punishments and torture for the sake of the pacifist cause during World War One. Although the poem may be, as Johnston argues, derivative of a poem written by one of Baxter's poetic idols, Percy Bysshe Shelley, the simplicity of the language and imagery sticks with the reader and communicates Baxter's message loud and clear (Johnston, 40).

O My Brothers

While *Loud Calls the Voice of Reason* examined pacifism in a wider, more abstract sense, *O My Brothers* is a direct call to action. Johnston describes the poem as a protest, as poetry was one of the many methods Baxter used to champion his peaceful cause (Johnston, 40-1). Baxter speaks directly to the reader, asking them to grapple with their own belief in violence and reflect on its consequences. The references to Mammon and Moloch heighten the sense of evil that Baxter believed went hand in hand with war and violence, and he rallies against humankind becoming enslaved to these figures of evil. This is a passionate poem, and one whose message is not to be taken lightly.

Song of the Shirker

Song of the Shirker is quite possibly the least recognised of Baxter's works. Given how little recognition is paid to all of Baxter's poetry in general, that is quite a feat. There is a typed copy in the collection of Baxter's literary papers in the Hocken library (reference number MS-975/MS-196), full of holes and with no discernible signature attributing it to Baxter. It is understandable why the poem has gone unnoticed – at a first glance, there is no proof that the poem is Baxter's. However, *Song of the Shirker* can be found in his son's eighth poetry notebook, copied in and credited to 'A.B' – Archibald Baxter. It is more than just the mystery surrounding the poem that makes it notable, however. *Song of the Shirker* is Baxter's only poem concerning World War Two. In it, he advocates that men flee to Australia rather than fighting or facing the consequences of being a conscientious objector. Given what Baxter went through in World War One, it is unsurprising that he would try to protect others from the same fate.

Simons Town

Baxter almost always drew on his personal beliefs and experiences for his poetry, and *Simons Town* is a good example of this practice. Simonstown is a small town in the Western Cape of South Africa, and Baxter spent some time there during his traumatic period of imprisonment as a conscientious objector during World War One. He was sent there to recover from a bout

of measles and, as he recounted in his well-known memoir *We Will Not Cease*, his brief stint in South Africa was “a respite... in a strenuous fight” (Baxter, 78). In the poem, his rich and vivid descriptions of the town convey this fondness, but also remind us of his desire to return home.

Spirits of Harmony, Music, and Love

Spirits of Harmony, Music, and Love is different from the previous poems in this collection in that it does not overtly refer to his experiences, beliefs, or influences. Instead, it focuses on the creation of the earth, and how the titular spirits were called upon to fill the world with harmony, music, and love. There is a sense of cognitive dissonance in this piece as Baxter, a devout Christian, calls upon spirits who are very much separate from the Christian beliefs. *Spirits* is a refreshing change in subject matter – a large portion of Baxter’s poetry is concerned with the destruction of the world through violence and war, whereas *Spirits* is the antithesis of these other poems. It carries with it a sense of hope and peace, two things Baxter strove to bring into the world for his entire life.

Great Universe, How Vast

Like *Spirits of Harmony, Music, and Love*, his next poem, *Great Universe, How Vast* has little to do with his pacifism, instead once more dealing with the creation of the world. This poem differs from the last because Baxter himself is speaking to the universe, rather than describing its creation from a passive standpoint. In the beginning, he writes of the seemingly impossible task of comprehending the world in its entirety, almost in awe of its greatness and scope. He then goes on to a more hopeful note – although we, as mortals, may not be able to comprehend God and his creation, we can still take what he has given us and make it our own, and it’s up to us whether we want to live in “thy heaven or thy hell.”

Death/The Watcher

This poem goes by two names – in Baxter’s original manuscript it is called *The Watcher*, while in his son’s notebook it is called *Death*. Both titles are equally appropriate, as Baxter personifies death as an omnipotent figure

who watches over mankind. In this instance, Johnston analyses the poem better than I possibly could:

“Death realises his presence is unwelcome, and that his task is a thankless one, but what he can offer to people, if only they were able to realise it, is in fact the benefits of the Holy Grail.” (Johnston, 80)

In December Days

As mentioned in the introduction to this collection, whether or not *In December Days* was written by Baxter is a subject for debate. The poem is included amongst Baxter’s literary papers and signed A.B – Archibald Baxter. The signature and its presence in Baxter’s literary papers do seem like sufficient evidence to prove that Baxter wrote it – however, there is more to it than that. The signature, while reading A.B, is different to other instances of Baxter’s signature. For example, when signing *Loud Calls the Voice of Reason* and *Spirits of Harmony, Music, and Love*, the letters are rounder and harder to distinguish, while the signature on *In December Days* is written in sharper, well-defined handwriting. The poem is curiously typed on the back of a letter from the New Zealand Employment Bureau from 1936, written to a man named Joseph O’Brien concerning his wife’s earnings. Nowhere in this letter is Baxter’s name mentioned, and it is a mystery as to how this letter came to be in his possession, let alone why he decided to write a poem on the back of it. Lastly, the poem itself seems doesn’t match the style of the poems confirmed to be Baxter’s – its language is more refined, and it lacks the earnest simplicity of his other works. Several theories about the poem’s origin have come up while discussing it with others: it’s possible Baxter did write the poem but signed it at a different point in time, hence why the signatures don’t match, or that Baxter left it unsigned but someone who knew he wrote the poem signed it for him. In the case that he didn’t write it, it is possible that somebody (potentially Joseph O’Brien) wrote the poem on the back of the letter some time after it was received, and sent it to Baxter, labelling it A.B so Baxter knew it was for him. Whatever the poem’s origins, I have included it in this collection for the sake of interest – and I hope that knowledge of the poems existence will prompt future research into its origins.

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