

**DARK VOCATION:
RELIGION IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF TWO
NEW ZEALAND CREATIVE ARTISTS -
JAMES K. BAXTER AND COLIN McCAHON**

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To go forward like a man in the dark
Is the meaning of his dark vocation...

The lifelong grave of waiting

As indeed it has to be. To ask for Jacob's ladder
Would be to mistake oneself and the dark Master.¹

James K. Baxter and Colin McCahon are generally regarded as New Zealand's greatest poet and painter (to use the word McCahon preferred), respectively. It would not be an exaggeration to say that both were obsessed with religion, and this passionate preoccupation is central to an understanding of their work and life. Baxter was a convert, first to Anglo-Catholicism and later to Rome. McCahon was plunged in the dazzling darkness of doubt, which is quite different from an agnosticism rooted in indifference or ignorance; he never joined a church, but biblical texts and religious motifs dominate his painting to an extraordinary degree. I knew Baxter well, for a time (I left New Zealand in 1962) and met MacCahon once, at a Student Congress. I wrote a poem about it, which is appended to this paper.

INTERSECTING LIVES

Both had a sense of artistic vocation from an early age. In 'A Family Photograph,' (1961) Baxter remembered

I in my fuggy room at the top of the stairs,
a thirteen year old schizophrene
Write poems, wish to die (CP 237-38)

In 1943 McCahon commemorated a first meeting with Baxter - who was then seventeen, unpublished and unknown - with a painting inscribed 'A Candle in a Dark Room'; later they drank together in Christchurch pubs and talked interminably about religion. Towards the end of Baxter's life, as we

shall see, they were estranged, but McCahon rose above this and commemorated his friend's death in a 1973 painting which bears the words, 'Jim passes the northern beaches'- a reference to a traditional Maori interpretation of the life to come. It had a special meaning for McCahon, who spent his last years at Muriwai, one of those beaches. The words would have meant nothing to either of them twenty years earlier.

Baxter's poems spring directly from his life and are a precious resource for any biographer. McCahon once said, 'My painting is almost entirely autobiographical'.² Baxter was born in 1926 and died, aged forty six, in 1972. McCahon was born in 1919; he lived until 1987, but in a sense his life ended in the late seventies, when he became a victim of Korsakov's syndrome, severe brain damage caused by alcoholism.³ His son William said much later, 'Everything was to excess in Colin's life, there were no in-betweens. He never lost his single-minded vision and only gave his complete loyalty to art and to no one else. His family came second.'⁴ Baxter wrote of himself, 'I / Live by extremes.' (CP71)

Both Baxter and McCahon married young; McCahon met his future wife, Anne Hamblett, at sixteen and married at twenty two; a gifted artist in her own right, she was to give up painting. In an interview on her seventy third birthday, she said, 'No I haven't painted for forty years, it was Colin's preserve.' She spoke of his drunkenness and infidelities, and said, 'He was the man who was not there.. not when he was needed.' But when asked what she would do if she had her life again, she looked at her untouched paint brushes and said, 'Much the same, I suppose.'⁵ Baxter married a brilliant Maori student, Jacqueline Sturm, who endured the tumult of life with Baxter the alcoholic, Baxter the reformed alcoholic, and, in the last years, long separations from Baxter the prophet. His clerical biographer cites a letter written late in life which mentions affairs with thirty five women, which he compares approvingly with the exploits of Mozart's Don Giovanni, who had relations with one thousand and three!⁶ Baxter's poems - which refer to two illegitimate children (CP 470) - chart both the ambiguities and difficulties of his marriage, and the enduring love which sustained it.

In quietness rises the fear
of gaps, crevasses in the mind,
Being so near, so near,

That could engulf us both. I hear
The snow-bridge crack, I see ice-devils bind
The person of my dear

And cannot help... (CP 258, written 1962)

In the last year of his life he dedicated a sequence of love poems to her. They are called, appropriately enough, *Autumn Testament*. In them he dreams of an old age which was not to be.

At the end of our lives
Te Atua will take pity
On the two whom he divided...
To you and me he will give
A whare by the seashore
Where you can look for crabs and kina
And I can watch the waves
And from time to time see your face
With no sadness. (CP 537-8)

McCahon worked as a seasonal fruit picker and as a cleaner (in the Auckland Art Gallery!) to support his family. Later he became a curator there, and then an Art School lecturer, retiring in order to paint full time. He had worked at night for so many years that at first he found it hard to paint in daylight. Baxter was a graduate, completing his degree after several famous failures in English III. For a time he worked for School Publications in Wellington, resigning to become a postman (a favoured pursuit among New Zealand artists at the time!). He returned to Dunedin as the Burns Fellow - a prestigious literary award. After several years there, he left abruptly, following a call to serve the poor and marginalised. The search led him to inner city suburbs in Wellington and Auckland, and, for a time, to a Maori village on the Wanganui, called Jerusalem. He died four years later.

REPUTATIONS

Baxter achieved national recognition while he was still a teenager; McCahon struggled for years with rejection, and its corroding effects. Baxter's greatness is generally accepted, as are the obvious facts that his output was uneven - in part because it was so vast - and that he wrote some appalling rubbish. He knew this himself, and would joke about *Blow Winds of Frightfulness*.⁷ I can add a hitherto unrecorded item to the inventory, an epithalamium he wrote for Bill and Dorothy Oliver, which began

I come to sing in unlaborious verse
The marriage of a poet and a nurse.

In McCahon's case, the art critics regard him as an extraordinary talent, but there is a considerable body of opinion which sees him very differently. Wystan Curnow said of him, in words which many have echoed:

By the time of the Survey exhibition (1972) McCahon had behind him a body of work unmatched for size and quality by any New Zealander... Having invented painting in New Zealand, he could now work in a tradition of his own making.⁸

But in 1948, the poet A.R.D. Fairburn wrote

The homespun pretentiousness of these drawings distressed me... In design, in colour, in quality of line, in every normal attribute of good painting, they are completely lacking. Is it possible that they have a meaning not to be picked up by the naked eye? Have they some profound religious revelation for us? I can only say that I suspect not. They might pass as *graffiti* on the walls of some celestial lavatory...⁹

Forty seven years later, a correspondent in a New Zealand Sunday paper, the *Star Times*, wrote:

[I] am familiar with McCahon's [work] and frankly I wouldn't give it house room. What is an artist? If McCahon was a competent draughtsman, I've seen no evidence of it. As a colourist, he was a nobody. His brushwork was sloppy and crude. Did he understand perspective? Could he use light? He has never demonstrated these skills. Apparently he was some sort of mystic, a proselytiser, a man with a message; and that's fine if you choose to be a disciple but he was never an artist.¹⁰

The journalist Frank Haden tells a story of pranksters who managed to sell ink-spattered gestetner pages in a trendy gallery as the work of an obscure genius, 'W.E. Wilson.' In 1995 he wrote, 'The next time I hear some art critic with lofty credentials promoting the view that Colin McCahon's amateurish daubs rank with Picasso, I'll remind him about W.E. Wilson.'¹¹

Rejection affected McCahon profoundly. A 1959 painting, *John [Caselberg] in Canterbury*, images the loneliness and melancholy of the artist, reflecting the black crows which hovered over van Gogh's cornfield. He wrote in 1966, 'I must admit to awful bitterness and to a hatred of "them"; this still exists.'¹² By the 1970s he was a recluse, unwilling to be interviewed or photographed. In 1972, he wrote to a friend, 'I hate being loved by my previous tormentors.'¹³ When success came at last it gave him little joy; resentment festered for the slights of the past.

We feel no hesitation in distinguishing Baxter's great poetry from his bad verse, and we owe McCahon this kind of discrimination. Probably what has hindered it most has been the massive financial investment in his

work. His Ecclesiastes paintings, produced in 1982 when his illness was far advanced, hang in corporate offices.¹⁴ In his last poem, Baxter wrote

The Auckland Art School gives me a pain in both my testicles.
They don't know the best of Illingworth.
They admire the worst of McCahon. (CP 599)

CONVERGENCES - LANDSCAPES AND DEATH

Early in life, McCahon had a visionary experience of the Otago landscape.

Driving one day with the family over hills from Brighton or Taieri Mouth to the Taieri Plain, I first became aware of my own particular God, perhaps an Egyptian God, but standing far from the sun of Egypt in the Otago cold... there was a landscape of splendour, and order and peace (The Crucifixion hadn't yet come,). I saw an angel in this land. Angels can herald beginnings. I saw something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really yet invented. My work has largely been to communicate this vision and to invent the way to see it.¹⁵

In his early work, he sometimes located Biblical themes in a specifically New Zealand setting - *I Paul to you at Ngatimote*, or *Marge as the Virgin Mary at Maitai Valley*.

Baxter grew up at the Brighton which McCahon mentions - a seaside village a few kilometres south of Dunedin. It threads his way through his early work - the brackish stream, the black rocks, the canoes for hire, the courting couples in the lupins.

So now I remember the bay and the little spiders
On driftwood, so poisonous and quick.
The carved cliffs and the great outcrying surf
With currents round the rocks and the birds rising...
I remember the bay that never was
And stand like stone and cannot turn away. (CP 45, written in 1946)

Twenty years later, he returned there

...No squid-armed Venus rose

Out of the surf, but through the smashed gate
Of many winters, from the hurdling water

Came to my heart the invisible spirit
These words have given shape to. (CP 371)

Both were to live in, and depict, other landscapes. McCahon painted the countryside near Takaka where he did seasonal work, and the view from

the bus as he went to work when he lived in Titirangi, on the outskirts of Auckland. Later he painted his beloved beach at Muriwai, where he had a studio. *The Promised Land* (1948) is a landscape within a landscape-the white sands of Golden Bay nestle within the green hills of the Nelson area. A jug and a candle rest at the painting's heart, symbols of Mary and Jesus, as other paintings of the time make explicit. An angel looks down - 'I saw an angel in this land. Angels can herald beginnings.' But apart from McCahon himself, in his black worker's singlet, it is an empty land, with no indication of the Maori presence.

The young Baxter had a strong sense of history, but it was of a landscape linked with his European forbears and with often solitary pioneers. A number of poems were inspired by cemeteries - *Book of the Dead* is an early example (CP 115-17, written in 1951). The judgement of his Calvinist forbears weighed heavily in his youth.

O why so cold my dear, and loth-
Is it the dark or is it I?
I heard my great-grand uncle cry
In tartan plaid and moleskin cloth:
I lived long in grief's despite
The law of Moses gave me light.'
'Tell me another one.' (CP 123, written 1952)

Later, a Catholic Baxter would consign Calvinists to purgatory - always, with him, a sign of approval.

...The dead who have no names
Are shouting *Miserere!* from the flames,
The sheep of Calvin, clipped for Judgement Day...
In the scrubwood pyre
They suffer, Lady. Hoist them from the fire... (CP 259, written 1962)

McCahon's work¹⁶ is permeated with the a sense of human mortality. *Dear Wee June* depicts a child's grave at Port Chalmers. He has an almost elegiac sense that the landscape endures when the interpreter has departed. Panel five of the Northland panels, from the same year, is inscribed 'A landscape with too few lovers.' A painting of 1959 states *Tomorrow will be the same, but not as this is*. An untitled painting of 1970 bears the words, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone can walk in daytime without stumbling because he sees the light of this world, but if he walks after nightfall he stumbles, because the light fails him'.

Robert Chapman, who knew McCahon well, writes thoughtfully :

He infused into these unpeopled scenes his own passion to go on being there and seeing them. He conveyed his dread that their beauty would persist for uncomprehending ages while his own transience as a human condemned him to leave behind this 'land with too few lovers'. He fought with his paintings against his death... For Colin that sense of mortality... was sharpened and given another meaning for him, however, when he was still a young man. Hiroshima and Nagasaki posed to the world the possibility of a fiery end.¹⁷

McCahon's later work is permeated by the threat of nuclear catastrophe and the present reality of environmental degradation. *Mondrian's Chrysanthemum of 1908* (1971) images the mushroom cloud of nuclear catastrophe.¹⁸ *Gates II* was conceived as conscious propaganda against nuclear war. He wrote to John Caselberg: 'I am becoming involved with an idea for a large-scale statement on nuclear warfare... I will need words... Words can be terrible but a solution must be given...'¹⁹ The key text, 'How is the hammer of the whole earth cut asunder and broken?', comes from Jeremiah 50:23. He uses this and other prophetic texts to paint the terror and horror of imminent nuclear destruction. The theme recurs in a 1971 painting called *Venus and Re-entry. The bleeding heart of Jesus seen above Ahipara*. ('This is based on happenings seen in our own skies and the terrifying present we live in.')

By the 1970's his passion for the environment had led to a profound ecological concern. Since Muriwai was threatened by developers, the series focuses on this beloved beach. He wrote in 1971:

I am painting about the view from the top of the cliff. This is at Muriwai. My cliff is as yet largely uncorrupted, but like almost everything else it is for sale. Below the cliff, my cliff only at present, quarrying is blasting away a unique and irretrievable rock face... I am not painting protest pictures, I am painting about what is still there and what I can still see before the sky turns black with soot, and the sea becomes a slowly heaving rubbish tip.²¹

He says of the *Necessary Protection* paintings:

They have to do with the days and nights in the wilderness, and our constant need of help and protection. The symbols are very simple. The I of the sky, falling light and enlightened land is also ONE. The T of sky and light falling into a dark landscape is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament or Egyptian cross.²²

Baxter had little interest in the nuclear threat or environmental degradation. He had, as we shall see, quite different preoccupations.

DIVERGENCES: DOUBTS AND CERTAINTIES

McCAHON

McCahon's early 'religious' paintings are mainly concerned with the major themes which were, for centuries, traditional in western Christian art. Until his first trip abroad - a visit to Australia in 1951 - he knew the great figures in western art history only from reproductions. It is not always clear whether he chose themes such as the Annunciation or the Crucifixion primarily because they figured so prominently in the art books he studied or for other reasons. A letter of 1945 says 'the real tradition comes from Giotto, Michelangelo, Gauguin. That is the tradition I try to cope with.'²³ His enthusiasm for Mondrian, which came later, reflected his feeling that his work liberated him from these older traditions. But this was another influence it was hard to break away from. 'As a painter, how do you get around either a Michelangelo or a Mondrian. it seems that the only way is not more "masking tape" but more involvement in the human condition.'²⁴

In 1954 he painted *I Am* and *I and Thou*; both are structures of great subtlety and complexity, mirroring the essential ambiguity of the subject matter. *I and Thou* is the title of the famous work by the theologian Martin Buber. *I Am* is God's description of selfhood from Exodus. It appears again and again in his art. *Victory over Death 2* (1970) is dominated by a great 'I am'. He says of this, 'A simple I AM but not so simple really, as doubts do come in here too. I believe but don't believe'.²⁵

In 1959 he produced the *Elias Triptych* and the hundred paintings of the Elias series. At their heart are the words which first appeared in an early painting, *The Crucifixion according to St Mark* (1947): 'Let alone, let us see whether Elias will come and take him down'. They haunt McCahon because they encapsulate his passionate existential doubt. It is enormously far distant from the apathy and indifference of a secularised society - agonised doubt is the shadow side of belief: 'Let be, let be, will Elias come to save him ever/NEVER?'

In the notes he wrote for his *Survey Exhibition* at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1972, he said

the 1959 Elias series... all come out of the story of the Crucifixion (which should now be read in the New Oxford Translation), and I became interested in men's doubts (this theme appears here and appears later - I could never call myself a Christian, therefore these same doubts constantly assail me too.²⁶

By the 1960's, *The Promised Land* (1948) has become a question - 'Was this the Promised Land?' In 1971 he painted *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness* - The Exodus journey has been reversed. He felt a growing affinity with Maori culture, not least because he shared its sense of the numinous quality of the landscape. He states this explicitly in his comments on his painting in Baxter's memory - 'bits of a place I love and painted in memory of a friend who now - in spirit - has walked this same beach... The Christian 'walk' and the Maori 'walk' have a lot in common...'²⁷ The *Shining Cuckoo* (1974) is in fourteen sections, mirroring the Stations of the Cross - a very common theme in his later work. It is based on a poem recorded by Ralph Hotere's father; the shining cuckoo, in Maori thought, travels along the path followed by the souls of the dead.

His last paintings were produced in 1982, five years before his death. Their texts come from Ecclesiastes - *The Emptiness of all Endeavour, Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look this is new', I applied my mind and I considered all the acts of oppression.* His son William writes

On the day of Colin's death, my sister and I felt compelled to clean his studio...As he became ill and ceased painting we were actively discouraged from entering the studio by Colin. It remained locked and disused for some years...As we cleaned the studio we found the painting *I considered all the acts of oppression*, symbolically face down on the floor...²⁸

This painting, based on *Ecclesiastes 4,1-8*, is conventionally regarded as his last work. The last entry in his vast painted anthology, painted from the extremity of his sickness, embodies a profoundly secular pessimism.

I considered all the acts of oppression here under the sun; I SAW
the tears of the oppressed,
and I saw that there was no one to Comfort them.
... I Counted the dead happy because they were dead...
I considered all toil and all achievement and saw that it comes from rivalry between man
and man.
This too is emptiness and chasing the wind.²⁹

They hung it on the wall of the church during his funeral, which was held in a Catholic church in his Auckland suburb, Grey Lynn. The parish priest, who knew little about McCahon, asked the media people what all the fuss was about. He was told, 'He's one of our public saints'.³⁰ The poet Charles Brasch, one of his earliest and most consistent supporters, had paid him this tribute, long before:

... that painter, contracted to pity,
 Who first laid bare in its offended harshness
 The act of our life in this land, expressed the perpetual
 Crucifixion of man by man that each must answer,
 Rendered in naked light the land's nakedness
 That no one before had seen or seeing dared to
 Publish- an outrage to all whose comfort trembles
 Hollow against such vision of light upon darkness.³¹

DIVERGENCES: DOUBTS AND CERTAINTIES

BAXTER

In 1974, McCahon painted *Jump*, which he dedicated to a nineteenth century Japanese painter; it seems to refer to the existential leap of faith. McCahon never made this leap, but Baxter did. The 'rumbustious bad young man' (CP 118) became a High Church Anglican in 1948, the year of his marriage. In 1955, he joined AA, and, against all the odds, attained a lasting sobriety. In 1958, he was received into the Catholic church. Baxter sometimes quoted Yeats, 'The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work.' McCahon chose the work. When he joined AA, Baxter consciously chose the life.

look at the simple caption of success,
 The poet as family man,
 Head between thumbs at mass, nailing a trolley,
 Letting the tomcat in:
 Then turn the hourglass over, find the other
 Convict self, incorrigible, scarred...
 The first gets all his meat from the skull-faced twin,
 Sharpening a dagger out of a spoon,
 Struggling to speak though the gags of a poem (CP282, 1963)

In AA, he met alcoholics, reformed and otherwise, some of whom were in prison and a disproportionate number of whom were Catholics.³² He fell in love with a church which he believed to be the special preserve of sinners and the poor... In his autobiographical novel *Horse* he writes of a man he calls Séamas, who

... was suffering from most of the troubles which a man can stumble into - girlfriend trouble, trouble with the drink, trouble with the police, landlady trouble, trouble with money, and a touch of mental disorder. Some of our conversation was theological, and it struck me like a thunderbolt, over the biscuits and coffee, that Séamas had no religious troubles whatever. His moral difficulties in no way disturbed the clear-cut faith which was his birthright as an Irish Catholic... I mention Séamas because he taught me that belief, not virtue, was the entrance ticket at the door of the church... He made it possible for me to become a Catholic.³³

Baxter fell in love with a church which he believed to be the special home of drunks, sinners and the poor. He went to confession incessantly, and embraced the total package of a pre-Vatican II church with an uncritical totality, which included Green Scapulars. He saw Mary as the mother of sinners, happily oblivious to an alternative Marian tradition - that of fatima, and many other apparitions, where she is a stern figure warning of a dreadful Endtime. Then and later, Baxter's view of both church and society was enormously simplistic. The poor are close to God, the rich are destined for hell. It was this which made his didactic poetry so effective. His poem on Biafra (which could equally well read Rwanda or Somalia) touched hearts around the world.

The deathheads of Biafra
Are haunting Bellamys
Where Scotch and soda trickle down
The throats of old MPs
And some men talk of justice
But most of the Credit Squeeze...

The dark bones of Biafra
Will never leave our door
Because all things are joined in Christ
And the rich must feed the poor
Or lie like broken dummies
In hell's department store... (CP 432-3)

Dives and Lazarus thread their way through his poetry, and in a sequence of seven poems, he celebrates the life and salvation of the Catholic meths drinker, Concrete Grady. He castigates the Establishment, embodied in Harry Fat or Benedict Cogwarden. (CP 242-3) Capital punishment made the issues as clear as the starving children of Biafra.

Te Whiu was too young to vote,
The prison records show.
Some thought he was to young to hang;
Legality said, *No*.
Who knows what fear the raupo hides
Or where the wild duck flies?
'A trapdoor and a rope is best'
Says Harry Fat the wise. (CP 163)

For a considerable time, Baxter lived the life of the Catholic man of letters and family man. But the Bohemian was not wholly extinguished, and erupted in *A Small Ode on Mixed Flattig*. provoked when a New Zealand university unwisely prohibited it - bawdy verses in praise of

youthful sexuality which distressed and perplexed many of his fellow Catholics.

The students who go double-flattering
With their she-cattling and tom-cattling
Won't ever get a pass in Latin
The moral mainstay of the nation
Is careful, private masturbation. (CP 396-99)

To some, there were two Baxters: the devout enthusiast for medals and scapulars, and the bohemian eulogist of mixed flattering. In 1968, a third emerged: the bearded unkempt prophet. Baxter foreshadowed the change in a poem written two years earlier, *The Perfect Wife*:

...That night
When she was at a meeting being nice
To Asian students, he packed all his clothes
In a big suitcase, wondered should he write
A note, but left none - caught a train and boat
To another town - there lived at the People's Palace
Drunk, dirty, celibate, having seen the light. (CP 342)

In the event, he would be neither drunk nor entirely celibate. But the impulse was clear.

In a sense, Baxter crafted roles for himself as consciously as he created poems: the youthful bohemian drunk and reprobate, the bearded barefoot prophet, rosary in hand. The fact that the prophetic role was created as carefully as the poems does not mean that it was insincere. Baxter as poet and Baxter as prophet have become inextricably entangled in New Zealand consciousness. We are in danger of losing sight of the texts of the poems in the icon; but ultimately, it is the poems to which we must return.

Once more, Baxter had chosen the life rather than the work; he had chosen to jump. He identified closely with Maori values, which often seemed warmer and more human than the legalism of his adopted church. He tried to found an enduring community - a 'tribe' - at the Maori village of Jerusalem. It failed to take root for a variety of reasons, not least tensions with the local Maori community. Those who joined him found their environs squalid and cold, and food in short supply; most drifted away. His own stay there was relatively short. His whole prophetic career lasted four years, some of which was spent in an inner city suburb of Auckland. He also tried unsuccessfully to found a community in Wellington.

The poems of the last years are sometimes self indulgent, partly because they were often written as letters to friends. There is a very

considerable egotism: Baxter lingers on his austerities, his bowel movements, and his lice. Often he writes with a self-righteousness which is far less attractive than the rumbustious bad young man. He sometimes felt that he had lost both his gift as a poet and the piety of his conversion with nothing to take their place; it may be significant that as he moved towards these insights, the old inspiration re-emerges.

The bright coat of art he has taken away from me...

Prayer of priest or nun I cannot use
The songs of His house he has taken away from me...

As the cross is lifted and the day goes dark
Rule over myself He has taken away from me. (CP 473)

He had once felt imprisoned in a cage of middle class respectability. From the viewpoint of Jerusalem, family life looked more attractive, and he often returned home. But he felt that he could not settle down there without abandoning his ministry to the poor and outcast.

The enthusiast who had worn a miraculous medal and a green scapular simultaneously now found himself at odds with church authority. The confessional honesty of his poems made his breaches of the church's moral code public knowledge. He felt that the rigidity of the church's teachings on sexual morality alienated the young and was impossible in his own life. Many felt that young drop outs should be encouraged to reintegrate with the life of the wider society, rather than retreat into an alternative one.

Many of his late poems are full of anger: anger at the church which sometimes - not always - condemned him. He blamed the failure of his projects on lack of support. He was blind to the fact that New Zealand's social problems could be more effectively tackled in other ways: political action, work in education and health, and so on. And again, as the indignation festers, the poetry declines.

I trapped the great boar,
A Jansenist priest in his lair,
His tusks were longer than the Auckland Harbour Bridge,
His logic pure as the seafoam...

Ritualism, fetishism, moralism,
Simplicism, angelism, dualism,
Drayload after drayload went swirling out the door.' (CP 595)

Too often, his anger embraced his friends - for failure to support his projects and proteges as fully as he would have wished, for reluctance to embrace a radicalised lifestyle.

Today I smashed a green hydrangea bush
With a walking stick...
Every leaf was the head of a friend... (CP 597, written in 1972)

Sadly, one of the friends with whom he fell out was Colin McCahon. Someone who was present remembers:

I was at Elam [Art School] from 1966-1968 when Colin McCahon was our painting lecturer... The Hunter twins... brought James Baxter to the art school common room one day to read some poetry. A few of us who had been alerted were there. He read out a poem he had just written called: 'Bullshit Castle' which was largely an attack on his friend, Colin McCahon.³⁴

He condemned him, it seems, for supposedly joining the Establishment; earlier, Baxter had asked McCahon for money, and been given less than he expected.³⁵ McCahon was, not surprisingly, deeply distressed by the incident, but after Baxter's death he designed stage sets for a festival of his plays and, as we have seen, painted *Beach Walk* 'in memory of a friend'.

As his life neared its end, Baxter sometimes worried about his salvation.

'Do you think Father,
The sins of the flesh are mainly mortal?'
'Yes.' (CP 470)

The bitterness and anger of McCahon's last years grew out of long years of marginalisation, and a recognition which came too late. In Baxter's case, it reflected his perception of an unjust and racist society and of an insincere and inconsistent Christianity. In his last poem, he compared Auckland - infelicitously enough - with an elephant with haemorrhoids and denounced, not the middle-aged Establishment, but the young, who had always been his friends. (CP 599).

He is buried at Jerusalem; his grave is marked by a river boulder, which carries, as he wished, a single word, the Maori version of his Christian name, Hemi. The poems remain, his settlement at Jerusalem vanished, though who knows what hearts it touched, what lives were invisibly transformed? In a late poem, he found a meaning in another's

dream, where a tidal wave washed over the home of his little tribe, which yet survived.

..Margaret told me once

A dream she had, about a house
In a meadow by the sea, old and full of passages,

Upstairs and downstairs rooms where the tribe were sleeping
And three great waves came out of the sea

And washed around the house and left it standing. (CP 560)

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- ¹¹ F. Haden, 'Turning a hoax into a real art form,' *Sunday Star Times*, December 10, 1995.
- ¹² C. McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80 (December 1966), p.364.
- ¹³ McCahon to Brown, Sept., 1972, quoted by Gordon H. Brown in *Catalogue: Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, (Auckland Art Gallery, 1988), p.26, n.5.
- ¹⁴ Rosemary McLeod, 'The State of New Zealand Art,' *North and South*, 1986, p.48. 'One of this country's most significant corporate art collections hangs in the top floor executive offices of the Wellington BNZ building. This late McCahon is worth around \$90,000.'
- ¹⁵ McCahon, 'Beginnings', pp. 363-64.
- ¹⁶ Some of the material which follows was included in Elizabeth Isichei, 'Dialogues of the Heart: Religious Identity and Colin McCahon (1919-1987)' in M. Andrew et. al., *Religious Studies in Dialogue*, (Dunedin, 1991), pp. 38ff, and appears here by permission.
- ¹⁷ Robert Chapman, personal communication, 19 May, 1989.
- ¹⁸ Cf. McCahon's comment in *A Survey Exhibition*, p.38: 'This is perhaps a chrysanthemum, perhaps a sunset: quite possibly a bomb dropped on Muriwai...'
- ¹⁹ Wylan Curnow, 'I will need words', Exhibition catalogue, *McCahon's Word and Number Paintings*, National Gallery, 1984, n. po.
- ²⁰ Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist* (Wellington, 1984) p.154.
- ²¹ *McCahon's 'Necessary Protection'* (intro. by Wylan Curnow. New Plymouth, 1977), p.6.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p.12.
- ²³ McCahon letter (recipient not stated), 5 February, 1945. Hamish Keith papers.
- ²⁴ *Colin McCahon A Survey Exhibition* (Auckland City Art Gallery), 1972, p.28
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.27.

²⁷ Colin McCahon to Peter McLeavy, 16 August 1973, extract on an invitation to a McCahon exhibition, September 1973.

²⁸ William McCahon, July 1993, in Francis Pound et al., *Colin McCahon: The Last Painting*, (Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, 1993), p.2.

²⁹ Painting's exact text transcribed in Gordon H. Brown, 'The Speaker, the Painter, the Discursive Dialoguer,' in Pound et al., p.13.

³⁰ Jonathan Mane, interview, 17 June, 1989.

³¹ Charles Brasch, 'I Think of Your Generation' (1948), extract in G. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1967* (Auckland, 1969), p 187.

³² On Baxter's life and writing as a Catholic, cf. Elizabeth Isichei, 'James K. Baxter: Religious Sensibility and Changing Church, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 1995, pp. 283ff.

³³ J. K. Baxter, 'Literature and Belief' in *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1967) p.45.

³⁴ Liz Coats, personal communication, 20 Jan. 1996.

³⁵ Gordon H. Brown in *Catalogue: Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, p.26, n.2.