

John Newton, *The Double Rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Commune* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Jason Goroncy

John Newton's engaging book, *The Double Rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Commune*, examines the Ngāti Hau community that Aotearoa's best-known poet James K. Baxter was instrumental in establishing at Hiruhārama, on the Whanganui River – "the country's first and most influential experiment in 'hippie communalism'" (p. 38). As Newton notes in his Introduction:

The double rainbow is Baxter's symbol for a mutually regenerative bicultural relationship. He recognised that the Pākehā majority ignored Māori culture, not just to the cost of Māori ... but also to its own detriment. Pākehā, he wrote in 1969, a few months before he first moved to Jerusalem, 'have lived alongside a psychologically rich and varied minority culture for a hundred years and have taken nothing from it but a few place-names and a great deal of plunder'. Pākehā culture's material dominance was accompanied by an arrogance and ethnocentrism which left it spiritually impoverished.

He cites Baxter:

*'Ko te Maori te tuakana. Ko te Pakeha te teina ...' The Maori [sic] is indeed the elder brother and the Pakeha [sic] the younger brother. But the teina has refused to learn from the tuakana. He has sat sullenly among his machines and account books, and wondered why his soul was full of bitter dust ...*

And then offers the following commentary:

*The cost was everywhere to be seen, but nowhere more plainly than among urban youth. For Baxter, their wholesale disaffection was a realistic verdict on the society they had inherited, a mainstream culture whose spiritlessness and meanness – to say nothing of its arrogance towards its neighbours – deserved no better. In the Māori world, by contrast, and particularly in Māori communalism, he believed he could see an alternative to this atomised majority culture – a system of values that answered to the longings and frustrations that he recognised, both in himself and in the young people around him. To establish an alternative Pākehā community that could 'learn from the Maori side of the fence' was to help restore, symbolically, the mana of the tangata whenua and to begin to resuscitate a Pākehā culture that was choking to death on its own materialism. (pp. 11–12)*

Such constitutes the earth from which a functioning intentional community at Hiruhārama budded, a community made up largely of those for whom mainstream Aotearoan society meant fatherlessness.

While concerned not to diminish Baxter's part in the formation of the Ngā Mōkai community but rather to place it in the context of a larger "utopian experiment" (p. 88) Baxter initiated, Newton seeks to "offer a stronger account of what Baxter achieved at Jerusalem by bringing into focus its collaborative dimension" (p. 16). He properly contends that what the 41-year-old Baxter set in motion, and towards which the baby-boomer "orphanage" of the damaged that was his living poetry bore witness to, was something considerably larger than Baxter himself, and that the unique cohabitation and set of cultural negotiations that were embodied in the Whanganui River communities (particularly Ngāti Hau, Ngā Mōkai, the church – which was "threaded through the life of the river" (p. 59) – and the Sisters of Compassion) draw attention to implications far beyond both Baxter or to the communities themselves. This, of course, is of the essence of Baxter himself, that before he was a hippie, he was "a Catholic, a Christian humanist, and an aspiring Pākehā-Māori" (p. 36), he was a poet-prophet charged not simply with interpreting the social environment that he inhabited, but of actively improving it, of giving material shape to it. The book is loosely divided into three main sections: an introductory phase that addresses the pre-history of the community and Baxter's first year of residence; a middle section that covers its heyday; and a downstream phase that describes the community's various offshoots and considers its legacy. The result – for the reader prepared to follow the narrative – is the stripping away of "cultural safety".

Newton details further upon what we know of Baxter from other places while eloquently introducing us to a host of other equally-fascinating characters – Father Wiremu Te Awhitu, pā women Dolly, Alice, Lizzie and Wehe (who are often remembered as "substitute" mothers (p. 89)), Aggie Nahona, and Denis O'Reilly among them. He also highlights Baxter's visionary kinship with French-born nun Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert with whom he shared "a staunch commitment to Māori, and to spiritual love as the first principle of a hands-on social mission" (p. 45). Newton argues that this part of Baxter's history "doesn't get acknowledged in Baxter's rhetorical point-scoring at the expense of the mainstream church. Without it, however, his own Jerusalem 'orphanage' would never have eventuated. In one sense the debt is symbolic or poetic: the presence of the church at Jerusalem draws te taha Māori into dialogue with the other key spiritual driver

of his later career, namely his Catholic faith ... Baxter brought his showmanship, and his personal (some might argue, narcissistic) sense of mission. But he also brought with him – embodied, or enacted – the self-interrogation and social radicalisation that had seized hold of the Catholic Church globally in the wake of Vatican II. After the Berrigans and the draft card burnings, after liberation theology, what did the Christian mission imply in the context of ongoing colonial injustice?” (pp. 46, 47)

Jerusalem was Baxter’s riposte to all those Pākehā institutions – the churches, the university, the nuclear family and so on – whose lack of heart and small-minded materialism were now failing Pākehā youth in the same way that Pākehā culture had always failed Maori. In looking for a remedy for the failings of Pākehā society, he found his prime inspiration in the communitarian virtues that he saw among Māori: aroha, mahi, kōrero, manuhiritanga. This was ‘learn[ing] from the Maori side of the fence’: his community was to be modelled on the marae. Of course, in offering this open door the commune depended entirely on the hospitality of Ngāti Hau ... But the commune was not just a place to live – a material shelter for whomever happened to be there ... it was also a piece of political theatre. And the commune’s significance as a political intervention depended for its fullest expression on publicity: it was intended, at least in part, to be a spectacle, a City on a Hill! At the same time, it was integral to the kaupapa that it be open to all comers. This was the paradox that Baxter was confronted by: the more effectively this vision was communicated, the more would it lead to a pressure of numbers that would overwhelm the commune’s own capacity to provide for itself, and which eventually must wear out the patience of the local community. (p. 65)

Yet Newton is at pains to point out throughout his study that Hiruhārama is more prodigious than Baxter. Indeed, the bulk of the book is given to defending and illustrating this thesis, that Hiruhārama after Baxter entered into a period of unforeseen maturity, and particularly the maturity of its relationship with the pā. Community life under Greg Chalmers’ leadership may have been less eventful, but those years from 1972 do more to fulfil Baxter’s hopes of regenerative partnerships than those prior.

Two chapters are concerned with articulating events birthed following the final closure of the community at Hiruhārama, and to highlighting that while a distinctive phase of the Ngā Mōkai narrative had reached its end, its impulse did not die with the community itself. Newton draws attention to a network of loosely affiliated houses – from flats and private homes, to crashpads and urban

shelters, to far-flung intentional communities – which functioned as homes-away-from-home for a diasporic Ngā Mōkai whānau, a “network of initiatives which imported the Jerusalem kaupapa back into urban contexts” (p. 154), and there “offering a dispersed community the chance of reconnection, reaffirmation and renewal” (p. 164). He recalls Hiruhārama’s various germinations at Reef Point, Wharemanuka and Whenuakura. “With the shutting of the original commune, these ‘shoots of the kumara vine’ [became] the focus of the Ngā Mōkai story. It’s here, in this ramshackle archipelago, that those who had been touched by Jerusalem attempted to keep alive the kaupapa” (p. 131).

The penultimate chapter, “Baxter’s Wake”, re-spotlights Baxter, and is given to argue that Baxter’s literary legacy and his social legacy are “shoots of the same vine” (p. 169):

*‘Jerusalem’ was never an alternative to the poetry; it was part of it, its logical destination, even its most vivid accomplishment. In his burial on the river we find Baxter the poet and the Baxter the activist inextricably entwined. This integration was precisely his ambition, and the fact he achieved it is what makes these events still resonate. (p. 171)*

So Newton appropriately accentuates Baxter’s formulation of the poet’s ethical task to be no mere interpreter of society but one who endeavours to make society more just. “It is this sense of embodied ethics ... which leaps into focus when we think about Jerusalem” (p. 179).

The Double Rainbow is the fruit of an incredibly-impressive amount of extensive and laborious research. Newton commendably resists romanticising Baxter, Baxter’s vision, or the Ngāti Hau “classroom” itself. Those engaged in Baxter’s work and who want to better understand his Jerusalem Daybook or are interested in his biography, those seeking to understand, assess and inform Aotearoa’s multi-cultural, historical and spiritual landscape, those wanting to listen and to speak intelligently into contemporary debates about the relationship between government authorities and badge-wearing gangs carving out their own neo-tribal identity, and, more broadly, to a nation fascinated with re-carving a new national identity which buries settler mono-culturalism in its wake, and those devoted to the challenging work of inspiring, creating, leading, building, replanting and closing local and grassroots communities will be well-served to have Newton’s essay in hand. An invaluable and timely record certain to inform, impress and inspire.