

Best New Zealand Poems 2001

[Home](#) [Introduction](#) [Contents](#)

James K Baxter

JAMES K. BAXTER was born in Dunedin in 1926 and died in Auckland in 1972. Probably New Zealand's best-known poet, he was also one of its most prolific. Published in 1980, his *Collected Poems* is a hefty tome, but it represents only about half of his output. "New" poems keep coming to light. Baxter published his first collection, *Beyond the Palisade*, when he was 18 and the torrent of verse was continual thereafter. His talent was universally acknowledged from the start, but his fearless social criticism rankled with many, especially in his last years when he parted company with his wife and children to set up a commune at Jerusalem on the Wanganui River. The standard biography is Frank McKay's *Life of James K. Baxter* (1990), but Paul Millar's 2001 book *Spark to a Waiting Fuse: James K. Baxter's Correspondence with Noel Ginn 1942-1946* adds much fresh material.

Paul Millar writes: "'A Pair of Sandals' was one of two 'wallpaper poems' written by James K. Baxter in large, clear printing on a wall at the home of the painter Michael Illingworth and his wife Dene. In 1973 the Illingworths removed the sections of wallpaper containing the poems and sent them to the Hocken Library to be lodged among Baxter's other papers. It's likely that 'A Pair of Sandals' was written no more than six days before Baxter's death. Its contents, and the context of its production, make a strong case for it being perhaps the very last poem he ever wrote.

"Baxter had arrived at the Illingworths' Puhoi home on Monday 16th October 1972, remaining with them until Thursday 19th October. On the morning of his departure he wrote his final published poem 'Ode to Auckland' at their dining table. Three days later, on Sunday 22nd, he lay dead in the Auckland home of strangers, killed by a major coronary thrombosis at the age of 46. Anecdotal evidence from those who met Baxter in these final weeks

makes it clear he knew he was dying. When he had abandoned his Jerusalem commune two months earlier it was with no clear destination in mind. Instead he moved erratically around the upper North Island, apparently overwhelmed by self-doubt and a sense of mortality, and desperate for love and companionship. In this respect 'A Pair of Sandals' captures the essence of that period. It is a poem taking leave of dear friends in which the destination, while unknowable, anticipates a meeting with the poet's ghosts, and with Te Atua — his Christ.

"However, 'A Pair of Sandals' is also much more than a simple leave taking. 'Te Whiori O Te Kuri' — the final poem sequence in Baxter's last book, *Autumn Testament* — concludes: 'A man's body is a meeting house, / Ribs, arms, for the tribe to gather under, / And the heart must be their spring of water.' The metaphor of his body as a meeting house for the tribe of Nga Mokai, the fatherless ones, was one that Baxter used on a number of occasions. But 'A Pair of Sandals' represents the final stage in the metaphor's evolution, a stage that leads to a vital synthesis with another of Baxter's key symbolic concepts. Baxter, the empty meeting house, has been gutted by his commune's failure. Spiritually and emotionally he has become a hollow man, an empty meeting house.

"Yet what should be a defeat becomes a triumph because in Baxter's poetry the hollow place stands at the symbolic center of a lifetime of writing. Cave, tomb, gap, void, Wahi Ngaro — the list is long, but the symbolism is consistent in identifying such apparently empty, lifeless spaces as paradoxically generative places where poems grow. So in this poem Baxter the hollow man, the empty meeting house, has become one with the source of his inspiration, the gap where poems grow. To take this a step further, the life has become the source of poetic inspiration, but not through good works or by committing words to paper, but literally by becoming Hemi te Tutua — Jim the Nobody.

"And this is where the poem becomes most significant, because the poetic victory brings with it a spiritual triumph. Baxter arrives at that mysterious place where poems come from, only to find Christ there waiting for him. In much theology only the true penitent, the man who has admitted failure and hollowed himself before God, is ready to receive God's grace, that free and unmerited favour. Thus the poem predicts that Baxter,

like the dying thief on the cross, stripped naked and vilified before society, and with nothing to offer but belief, is ready to join his Christ in paradise. This brief verse, perhaps the last thing Baxter ever wrote, and left only on a friend's wall, suggests that in his final few days Baxter had achieved some type of artistic and spiritual closure."

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