

happening in his life at that time. One notes, for example, that all but one of the essays are either from the mid-1970s, or the 1990s and early 2000s. The 1980s are conspicuously absent. This raises immediately unanswered questions. The editor, Michael's daughter, Rachael, has chosen to let her father speak for himself — which is fine for the general reader, but a bit frustrating for the scholar.

The third group of historians who will find *The Silence Beyond* of value are those interested in literary or intellectual history. Almost half of the essays are about writers, and there is also a brilliant and moving tribute to the photographer Robin Morrison. These pieces on writers are full of fascinating gossip. They are not literary criticism but usually tell of Michael's personal encounters with the individuals. Janet Frame (in two essays) and Frank Sargeson are to be expected. But I particularly enjoyed Michael's meetings with Dan and Winnie Davin, and a hilarious piece about Charles Brasch. In the company of some boozing student mates, Michael went along to Charles Brasch's home to enjoy what they expected would be some Saturday night carousing with a fellow writer. That's what writers did on Saturday nights. But not Charles Brasch. He was fast asleep when the knock on the door came, and he was not amused. They had to make do with a thimble-full of sherry! There is also an amusing account of the peregrinations of the *Landfall* desk which, with legs sawed off unevenly and cut in two, became Frame's writing desk, following her from one provincial town to another. In these essays King presents in one sense as a successor to Pat Lawlor, in every way a superior writer to Lawlor, with more intelligent judgments and a much superior ability to tell a really good story. But like Lawlor he was a cultural nationalist and, above all, a 'bookman'.

What comes through, in the end, is that Michael King liked to think of himself primarily as a New Zealand writer, rather than a professional historian. He searches out meetings with other 'creative' writers and devotes his last years to writing the biographies of the two most important writers of the previous 40 years, Frame and Sargeson. There is one lively essay in which Michael describes being mistaken several times for Maurice Shadbolt. One gets the sense that he is pleased that he is recognised as a writer, even if the wrong one! His community is not that of academic, or even 'public', historians. In that sense Rachael King has edited this book in a way her father would have approved. The essays have been put together to work as a flowing and always entertaining piece of literature, rather than to inform scholars about Michael or his history. Enjoy it or leave it on those terms.

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The Snake-haired Muse: James K. Baxter and Classical Myth. By Geoffrey Miles, John Davidson and Paul Millar. Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2011. 380pp. NZ price: \$50. ISBN: 978-0-86473-658-1.

'LIKE A STRANDED WHALE, the poem lies resting on the beach of New Zealand literature, an embarrassment that no one knows what to do with' — so Patrick Evans described Alfred Domett's 500-page epic *Ranolf and Amohia*.¹ James K. Baxter's oeuvre is similarly whale-like in its proportions, and while it is not so hopelessly out of fashion as Domett's poem, it is somewhat embarrassing to contemporary New Zealand literary historians who do not know how to place it, for there is nothing quite like it in New Zealand literature. Despite Baxter's early death at 46 in 1972, he produced a quantity of work that is very difficult to see around. In addition to the 429 pages of poems in the *Collected Poems*, there are the many uncollected poems published in periodicals, the 29 manuscript books

he wrote between 1936 and 1968, and the less formal and finished 31 notebooks he filled in his last four years. Then there are the 326 pages of the *Collected Plays*, the uncollected plays, a posthumously published novella, and the many reviews, essays, lectures and stories — some collected, some published only in periodicals, some left in manuscript. Baxter may be, as the authors claim, ‘New Zealand’s most iconic poet’ (p.7), but John Dennison, in his review of *The Snake-haired Muse* in *Landfall*, referred to his poetry as ‘the sad remains of James K. Baxter’s myth-eaten verse’, existing in ‘the realm of dead reputations’ and in need of being ‘revived’.²

In the 40 years since his death, Baxter’s work has been gradually sinking below the critical horizon. Yet there have been a number of scholarly contributions to the study of his life and writings, beginning with Frank McKay’s selection from his literary criticism in 1978 and John Weir’s edition of the *Collected Poems* in 1979; W.H. Oliver’s ‘portrait’ (1983); McKay’s biography (1990); the 1992 Baxter conference at the University of Otago (with papers collected in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 13); Millar’s editions of Baxter’s unpublished second book of poetry (1996) and of his youthful letters to Noel Ginn (2001); John Newton’s study of the older Baxter and the Jerusalem commune (2009); and last year’s Otago symposium on Baxter and Robert Burns. *The Snake-haired Muse* was originally ‘modestly conceived’ as a minor addition to this group — ‘a short monograph on Baxter’s mythic allusions, of interest to specialists and perhaps a reference work for classically-baffled students’ (pp.7, 247). The authors began with the expectation that ‘the substantial strand of early classical myth poems would thin, at times break, and eventually interweave with Christian belief and Maori tikanga to produce a more twentieth-century, New Zealand-sourced kit of mythic themes’ (p.248). But as they got into the study of the use of classical myth in the full range of Baxter’s work, published and unpublished in all genres, they discovered that Baxter’s use of classical myth, ‘far from being dispensable baggage . . . lies close to the heart of his poetic project, and that the criticisms made of it often rest on assumptions about poetry in New Zealand — what it is and what it should be — that are positively unhelpful in dealing with the kind of poetry that Baxter was trying to write’ (p.18).

The resultant book, presenting Baxter as ‘unapologetically mythic, enduringly Romantic, and idiosyncratically religious’ (p.251), is ground-breaking, a study that should change the terms of the discussion of Baxter’s work. The 86-page final section, Miles’s ‘encyclopedic catalogue of every character from classical myth mentioned in Baxter’s works’ (p.265) carries out with impressive thoroughness the authors’ original reference-work aim. The first and last chapters bookend the more ambitious argument they finally arrived at, with Miles in chapter one summarising the consensus critical devaluation of Baxter’s use of classical myth as ‘baggage’ (a consensus developing from Allen Curnow’s criticism in the 1950s) and setting out the argument against it, concluding triumphantly that ‘Across his writing career of more than three decades [Baxter] continued to carry his classical baggage, and he managed to pack a great deal into it’ (p.39). Millar, in chapter nine, ‘looks at the implications of the book for Baxter’s place in New Zealand literature, and scouts some avenues for further study in relating his classical myth to his use of Maori and Christian imagery’ (p.9).

In the second chapter, Millar discusses the way that Baxter’s poems in his childhood and adolescence use characters from classical myth as ‘figures of self’ to express his own developing intellectual and emotional states, concluding that in those years he got his ‘indispensable education’ from myth and its uses which served him for the rest of his life. Instead of continuing with a chronological approach, the authors in the central six chapters present ‘case studies’ of Baxter’s use throughout his mature works of significant figures, motifs and themes from classical myth. Davidson, recently retired as Professor of Classics at Victoria and the originator of the project, tackles the ‘notoriously

problematic area' (p.9) of Baxter's treatment of female figures from myth, from Venus to Medusa. In a complex, detailed argument he demonstrates that for Baxter there were many varied 'avatars of a single divine archetype' of the feminine: 'Venus, goddess of love and beauty; Cybele, earth mother and emasculating lover; Artemis, chaste moon-maiden and fierce huntress; and the witch queen Hekate'. Thus 'maternity, beauty, erotic love and sexual torment, chastity, fertility, death [were] all tied together in Baxter's concept of the feminine, and all inextricably linked with poetic creativity, embodied in the figure of the Muse' (pp.70-71). The dark side of the 'infernal feminine' Davidson discusses as embodied not only in Cybele and Hekate, but even more negatively in Circe, the Furies, and Medusa and other gorgon figures. Davidson is careful to point out that the 'variety of functions' carried out by the negative female figures in Baxter's work 'cannot be reduced to a monomyth, Jungian or otherwise', and that they should not be viewed primarily as 'statements about the nature of women', but rather as 'statements about Baxter's mental landscape, about the human (male) condition, and about the forces which goaded or scourged him into poetry'; thus 'they are very close to the heart of his creative process' (p.116).

Miles follows with two closely argued chapters on Baxter's treatment of three male heroes: Hercules, associated with the Hesperides; Theseus, associated with the Labyrinth and with political expediency; and Odysseus, Baxter's central classical figure. In a *tour de force* of explication he traces the development of Odysseus from a Romantic Man Alone figure seeking freedom, to an existentialist hero asserting 'the power of human will to create meaning in a meaningless universe' (p.186), and finally to a pagan hero to be contrasted with Christ on the cross. Davidson adds a chapter on Bacchus/Dionysus as related to 'alcohol, inspiration, and madness, a liberating and imprisoning figure ambivalently close to [Baxter's] heart' (p.8), while Miles closes the case studies with a chapter on Baxter's use of Hades and the underworld to represent death, addiction, despair and oblivion.

Occasionally the book threatens to lose the thread of the argument in detail, but ultimately it succeeds in showing effectively how Baxter's complex and varied uses of classical myth were central to most of his work throughout his career. As Millar points out, the study does not attempt 'to decide whether Baxter is prophet or poseur, a marvellous poetic talent or as relevant to the history of New Zealand literature as the moa' (p.261). It presents no answer to the ultimate critical question raised by Baxter's work — whether his self-mythologising in using figures from classical myth, that Dennison calls 'universalised projections of the troubled self', is the creation of a major poet or just an exercise in the egotistical sublime, but any future critics or literary historians attempting to answer the question will need to take into account the book's argument and its exemplary reference to the full range of Baxter's works.

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NOTES

- 1 Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*, Auckland, 1990, p.43.
- 2 John Dennison, 'Myth-eaten: JKB's Habits of Mind', *The Landfall Review Online*, December 1, 2011.