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Archibald Baxter, *We Will Not Cease*

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Archibald Baxter, *We Will Not Cease* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2021), Revised Edition, 216pp. NZ\$30. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-9885-9299-2.

Early in the morning of 14 July 1917, Colonel James Potter, commander of Trentham Military Camp near Wellington arranged for military policemen to rouse 14 conscientious objectors from their beds – either from his punishment compound or from Wellington's two jails-handcuff and frogmarch them down the waterfront to board a troopship, the *Waitemata*, on route to Britain and thence to the war's frontline in France. This was a consequence of Defence Minister James Allen's belief that men who had failed their appeals against war service on grounds of conscience should still be eligible to serve. Naively, he believed such men would change their minds when they were amongst the soldiers who were 'doing their bit' under trying circumstances to combat the foe.

On the ship, through strength of character, two of these men, Archibald Baxter and Mark Briggs asserted a leadership and inspiration to the others' to resist the soldiers' blandishments. Only these two would refuse to wear army uniform aboard the ship and resist, finally, the brutality meted out to them both at England's Sling Camp and in France to try to make them fight. Baxter had resisted war on both religious and Christian socialist grounds.

In 1937, Baxter and his wife Millicent visited England travelling to Salisbury Plain and Sling Camp north of Southampton. It was there that he began to unlock hitherto shut-away memories by commencing a memoir of his wartime experiences. He dictated it to his wife Millicent to type because she was quicker and it enabled him to reflect on his experiences, often closing his eyes as he did so. He was often reluctant, squirming from the memory. She pushed him. 'you are only giving me the bare bones,' she chided. 'You must give me more than that.' He did. Afterwards she used her literary skills to edit it. As a consequence it became starker and more articulate.

The final account named *We Will not Cease* is comprehensive, brutal, and humble – even compassionate to some of his captors and soldiers especially those conscripts who understood his travails. Twelve of the fourteen objectors succumbed to the brutality becoming stretcher-bearers, often under the most trying of circumstances. One was killed. At Sling Camp in Britain, a defiant Baxter was incarcerated separately from the others. Refusing at all times to wear uniform he was punished with long periods of detention in solitary confinement, a bread and water diet, forced dressing, and physical and mental abuse from the military policemen (redcaps) guarding him. When he was occasionally let out for a walk he was handcuffed. He was continually threatened with court-martial. During his last weeks in Sling because of the exasperated military policemen (redcoats), Baxter spent much of his time in leg-irons and he remained hand-cuffed all the times he was not eating or sleeping.

Similar viciousness was inflicted upon him after he was sent to France. Bruised ribs and a bloodied face became 'standard procedure'. More graphic was how unsympathetic redcaps abused the strict rules around the use of Field Punishment No. 1 (the Crucifixion) which required malcontents to be bound to a pole in the open with their hands tied behind their backs. The regulations stated that the feet were meant to be on the ground; that they could move their hands and feet, and that they were to be left standing for only two hours three days out of every four. Field Punishment was intended as humiliation and discomfort, not torture. Yet redcaps, far from prying eyes of others tied him up for four hours or more on end in

all weathers; the rope was so tightly drawn that it cut into his flesh and his feet were tied that they could not touch the ground. He was in excruciating pain; his hands became numb and black with congested blood. Very slowly he found inner reserves of mental strength to displace the physical pain which he absorbed. He knew after he survived the second series of this brutality that he would never surrender.

Among the cruelty there were moments of kindness. The most remarkable was when towards the end of his defiance, four conscript soldiers were ordered by an exasperated captain – who had already assaulted him when Baxter refused to parade – to lift him as high as they could and then drop him on the duck-boards which had nails protruding out of them. The men lifted Baxter high and then lowered him gently to the ground keeping hold of him at all times. Cursing, the captain screamed at the men to lift and drop him. Twice more, without saying a word, the men lifted him and lowered him slowly to the ground. With these soldiers' help, Baxter, now thin and emaciated, had won a moral victory.

This book is remarkable and has become a classic in Aotearoa New Zealand literature. Baxter shows no rancour towards who wished him harm; his Christian faith allowed to him to rationalise that they 'knew not what they did'. The understated nature of the prose allows an even more sustained resonance upon the reader of Baxter's humility and utter determination that he would not be broken. It is no surprise then that this is the sixth edition of *We Will Not Cease*, first published by Victor Gallancz in London in 1938 to be followed by further editions in 1968, 1980, 1983, 1987, and 2003. With a close eye on the forthcoming decision to make the teaching of Aotearoa New Zealand history in schools compulsory Otago University Press is to be congratulated for allowing a whole new generation of readers to be educated and appalled at the futility of war from a starkly human perspective.

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