

Story: Baxter, Millicent Amiel

Cooper, A., 1996

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### Baxter, Millicent Amiel

1888–1984

Pacifist

This biography was written by Annabel Cooper and was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 3, 1996

Millicent Amiel Macmillan Brown was the elder daughter of Helen Connon, an early woman graduate of Canterbury College, and her husband, John Macmillan Brown, one of its founding professors. She was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 8 January 1888, conveniently during the summer vacation as her mother was then principal of Christchurch Girls' High School. Millicent was tutored at home, under her mother's supervision, and later by her father.

1881

When Millicent was 15 and preparing for scholarship examinations her mother died suddenly on a family holiday to Rotorua. Her father's expectations, always high, redoubled, but she passed only three of five

subjects in a senior scholarship examination in Australia and failed a junior scholarship examination in New Zealand. She attended the Presbyterian Ladies' College in Sydney in 1905 while living with an aunt and matriculated the following year.

Although Millicent saw herself as no scholar, university was an assumed next step. She completed her BA in Latin, French and German at the University of Sydney in 1908. She continued with languages at Newnham College, University of Cambridge, gaining a second in the tripos in 1912, but the degree was not conferred since Cambridge did not then award degrees to women. At Newnham, she discovered, 'If you had no religion it was perfectly all right. No one minded. But if you did have a religion it had to be Anglican. Anything else was socially beyond the pale.' Millicent became a Presbyterian.

After Cambridge she spent 18 months at university in Halle, Germany, studying Old French and learning German. War broke out during her return journey to Australia and New Zealand. Millicent was 26, and, arriving from Europe, struck her Australian cousins as 'the last word in fashion'. On her return home her relationship with her father remained tense. She had 'become used to five years of complete independence and I found it very difficult to accommodate myself to other people's directions and wishes.'

She did the usual war work for women of her class, with the Red Cross and the Lady Liverpool Fund, and, later, at a bureau providing information about missing soldiers. In mid 1918 a friend showed her a letter written by Archibald Baxter to his parents in Otago. It spoke of the extreme punishments he was suffering in France as a conscientious objector, and of the pacifist convictions that sustained him. Millicent said later that 'It moved me, right out of my shell into the open; and in the open I have remained, looking into things, questioning them.' She became a pacifist.

At the end of the war she worked as a hospital telephonist during the influenza epidemic. So disturbing was the experience that she disliked telephones for the rest of her life. In 1920 she found employment at Wellington Girls' College, a post she never took up because her father was to go temporarily to the University of Otago to teach English. He would not go without her, and she went. When he 'decided he had done enough and left for one of his trips', Millicent and his assistant taught the final term's work. Charles Brasch met her at this time, noting the 'strong independent inquiring mind' which was her chief characteristic.

In Dunedin Millicent met other pacifists, and went to Brighton to meet Archie Baxter. A farmer, he had left school at 12 but had 'the perfect understanding I had imagined and never found'. They went to Middlemarch with friends and climbed the Rock and Pillar Range, corresponded, and agreed to marry. Millicent kept his 'notorious character' secret from her patriotic father, but Macmillan Brown pointed out the disparity in their backgrounds and stated his opposition. Millicent was certain and determined. They married in the Dunedin Registrar's Office on 12 February 1921; they were to have two sons, Terence John, born in 1922 and James Keir, born in 1926. In 1921 they bought a farm at Kuri Bush, near Brighton, where they farmed for nine years. Millicent, who had never kept house before and had been brought up in one of the grandest houses in Christchurch, taught herself to cook from French, German and Italian cookbooks and did her washing on a bench outside. She also planted trees and a garden.

For the rest of her life Millicent was involved with peace campaigns. During the 1920s the Baxters were harassed by officials and by patriotic residents, a legacy of Archie's war record and their continuing public stance on pacifism. They were conscientious parents, attentive in the manner of advanced thinkers of the time to their children's physical, emotional and intellectual development, packing them up for family holidays each summer and travelling throughout the South Island. About 1930 they sold the farm and moved to Brighton, and Archie went shearing.

In 1935 Macmillan Brown died, leaving Millicent an annuity and 'that intangible legacy, things of the mind which are more important'. The annuity meant that they were freer to travel. In 1936 they spent a year in Wanganui, where they had placed their sons at the Friends' School. The following year they went to Europe. The family travelled extensively, but for much of the time the boys again went to a Quaker boarding school, in England. They made further contacts with internationalists and pacifists at the War Resisters' International Conference in Copenhagen. The family returned to Brighton in 1938.

The Baxters' pacifist activity then focused on meetings of the New Zealand No More War Movement, later the New Zealand Peace Pledge Union, and they were central figures in these meetings before and during the Second World War. In 1941, following the introduction of conscription, the Armed Forces Appeal Boards began hearing the cases of conscientious objectors, and Millicent attended nearly all the local hearings through the war. Her son Terence, an objector, was in detention from 1941 to 1945. Millicent saw MPs and ministers, attempting to ensure reasonable conditions for him and other detained objectors, and arguing the objectors' case. She, Archie and their pacifist friends collected signatures for petitions. Once again the Baxters were the object of official and local harassment.

Millicent's commitment to anti-militarism, and later nuclear disarmament, continued for the rest of her life. In 1954 she wrote to the *Otago Daily Times*, objecting to the 'callous disregard of the...effects of the H-bomb tests on members of other races'. She belonged to the

United Nations Association of New Zealand, corresponded for Amnesty International, and was patron of the peace organisation Voice of Women. But her interest in plants and natural history gained priority. She always loved camping, and her letters to the paper in the 1960s supported the campaign to preserve Lake Manapouri. Journeys overseas were increasingly focused on mountain climbs and botany. In 1956 she joined the Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club, and organised their annual trips from 1962 to 1975. She developed her own alpine garden. On one trip to Dunstan, she and Archie discovered a new species of plant, *Gingidium baxterii*.

Archie Baxter died in 1970. Some years earlier they had each, independently, decided to convert to Catholicism. Millicent's reason was 'Pope John and the desire for security', although she noted that the conversion of her son James, by this time a celebrated poet, had influenced them both. After Archie's death she sold the house at Brighton and moved to Kaikorai Valley, closer to Dunedin, and lived alone until she was hospitalised for a broken hip in the year before her death, aged 96, on 3 July 1984. She had remained active until she was very old, travelling to England to see her sister and then to the mountains in northern Italy in her late 80s, and making new, young friends until her last years.

**How to cite this page:**

Annabel Cooper. 'Baxter, Millicent Amiel', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3b20/baxter-millicent-amiel> (accessed 17 January 2017)