

William Henry Dunning: The Quiet Man

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ABSTRACT: Tasmanian-born architect William Henry Dunning (1872-1933) commenced his New Zealand practice in Timaru in 1907. Initially trained in Hobart, under the notable church designer Alexander North, Dunning's experience as a colonial architect was further extended in Cape Town. His association with fellow Tasmanians Alfred and Sidney Luttrell drew him to Dunedin where he supervised the construction of the New Zealand Express Company Building.

Dunning was an ambitious architect. His competition entries included designs for the New Zealand Parliament Buildings (1911) and the Auckland War Memorial Museum (1922). Despite the quality of his work, and efforts towards self-promotion, Dunning's most significant contribution to the city's architecture, the National Bank (1911) has been frequently attributed to another designer. The remainder of his work is also little known. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which architects asserted authorship during the period and will attempt to map the shifting responsibilities between architects and builders that allowed Dunning's contribution to the National Bank project to become obscured.

The National Bank in Princes Street, Dunedin is an enigmatic building. With its robust Classical detailing and warm brown Pyremont stone facade, it would have looked as much at home in Sydney or Melbourne when it was completed in 1912. Cleverly scaled at an apparent four storeys but with a fifth in the form of an attic behind the parapet, and sixth with a basement at the rear, it occupies a narrow site in the old central business district where its neighbours were once the AMP Building, Bank of New South Wales and the Bank of New Zealand. This tightly packed set of Victorian classical business chambers was one of New Zealand's finest architectural groupings, containing work by William Mason, Louis Boldini and William Armson,

now represented only by Armson's Bank of New Zealand and the National Bank.¹ Equally as impressive as the finely modelled exterior, the 310 square metre (64 x 52 feet) banking chamber was an impressive feat of engineering. Virtually free of supporting columns, the chamber opened out into a double height space behind the facade, its domed glass roof supported on concrete arches springing from the walls. Given its importance within this precinct, little was known about the designers of the National Bank until recently. Its authorship has been somewhat confused and this has led to the privileging of one individual involved in the project and the obscuring of another. It is the aim of this paper to unravel the different strands which form our

notions about design and identity and to look at the practice of architecture during the Edwardian period in Dunedin to see how this occurred.

Many casual enquiries about early Dunedin architecture can be answered by dipping into Hardwicke Knight and Niel Wales' book *Buildings of Dunedin*, published in 1988. While not a rigorous academic production, it is a handy guide to the significant buildings of the city and the relative status of architects practising in the city over the past 150 years. Under the entry for Charles Fleming MacDonald[sic]² is a terse two line entry that tell us that "MacDonald was an architect and contractor with an address at 11 Bond Street,

¹ McCoy and Blackman *Victorian City of New Zealand* fig 5, fig 26.

² "McDonald" is the spelling used in the company letterhead.

Dunedin." and a description of the National Bank from the *Otago Witness* of 15 March 1911.³ This did not seem quite enough information to do justice to such a sophisticated building but no other work by McDonald was otherwise evident to put his design of the National Bank in context. Robin Skinner kindly offered to search the Shepherd file at the Auckland School of Architecture and provided another name associated with the bank, William Henry Dunning. Enquiries around older and knowledgeable sources in the profession suggested that Dunning and his son had practised in the city for almost 60 years between them but there was little awareness of their work. At this point, Dunning seemed at least to be very reticent in a profession that usually relies on a level of public recognition. While McDonald was consistently noted in relation to the National Bank, Dunning had been all but forgotten.⁴

As might be anticipated by the quality of the National Bank project, but belied by his lack of profile, William Henry Dunning was an architect of ambition and skill working at the

leading edge of new construction technology. He was born in Launceston, Tasmania in 1872, the fifth child of John Dunning, a drapery merchant with premises in Brisbane Street, and Susannah Sophia (nee Luttrell).⁵ While relatively small in population, Launceston attracted a number of significant architects including Alexander North (1858–1945). North trained at the Lambeth School of Art in London and worked for the noted church architect James Cubitt (1836–1912). He emigrated to Tasmania in 1883, initially working for the government in Hobart. North's early work in Launceston was characterised by a robust R Norman Shaw eclecticism, incorporating Anglo-Dutch, French Renaissance and Queen Anne elements. His Launceston Post Office (1889) is a typically vigorous example of his civic work showing his use of corner turrets, Flemish gables and the diverse treatment of elevations on corner sites. Dunning trained with North during the early 1890s, collaborating on additions to the Holy Trinity Church at Cressy in 1894.⁶ North was also an early exponent of reinforced concrete construction and Dunning's experience in this

progressive firm was clearly influential and significant in light of his later work in New Zealand. Dunning left Tasmania for South Africa with his wife Kate Helen in 1896, arriving shortly before the Second Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), and worked in Cape Town for around 12 years.⁷ The war significantly disrupted existence in the Cape Colony but Dunning probably gained further experience in reinforced concrete construction with this technology gaining a strong hold in local architectural practice. The Cape Colony's links to Britain exposed Dunning to a range of influences that were simultaneously shaping building design in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Dunning's next move was to New Zealand, arriving in Timaru prior to 1908 when he entered a brief partnership with the contractor and engineer William Black for the design and construction of the new head office of the Canterbury Farmers Co-operative Association.⁸ A set of drawings for this project are held at the Dunedin City Council archives⁹ and are clearly from the Christchurch firm A &

³ Knight and Wales *Buildings of Dunedin* p 161.

⁴ Gardiner "A Notable Bank" p 8.

⁵ The Graves Family Association "Descendants of Robert Graves and Sophia Morgan" np.

⁶ Henslowe *Our Heritage of Anglican Churches in Tasmania* p 20.

⁷ Myles [message posted] np.

⁸ Anon. "Obituary, Mr W. H. Dunning" p 7.

⁹ The Dunning Collection contains drawings by William Henry and Cecil Gardner Dunning from 1906 to 1960.

S Luttrell, being a truncated version of their later well known New Zealand Express Company building in Dunedin. The presence of this drawing in Dunning's practice is evidence of some sort of relationship with the Luttrells although Dunning is not mentioned in Ann McEwen's very thorough study of the firm in her 1988 MA thesis "From Cottages to 'skyscrapers': The architecture of AE & ES Luttrell in Tasmania and New Zealand." The fact that Dunning's mother was a Luttrell may be coincidental, but he was the same age as Sydney Luttrell and they had worked for competing practices in Launceston where they almost certainly knew one another.¹⁰ The resultant building is entirely different to this proposal and must be assumed to be Dunning's design, perhaps gaining preference over the Luttrells in competition. The Canterbury Farmers Co-operative Association building was built to replace another only six years old destroyed by fire and Dunning's two-storey ferro-cement project was described as a modern-classical type, fire proof and employing highly up to date engineering.¹¹ This building, engineered to an unknown French and German system and now lost, was

one of the first modern reinforced concrete office buildings in New Zealand. Also evident is Dunning's tendency to enter business relationships with builders in order to both design and construct his projects, an arrangement that had fallen out favour with the profession and would have implications later on.

Dunning left Timaru for Dunedin in 1908 where he next "was associated with Mr C.F. MacDonald in the construction of the New Zealand Express Company Building."¹² As has been often observed, the New Zealand Express Company combined the form of an American office building with new methods of reinforced concrete construction that were becoming accepted in Europe and Britain. The two major systems used in the building were thoroughly up to date with international practice. Patents for the Hennebique system were lodged in Britain in 1892 and the Visintini system for incorporating framed beams into reinforced concrete construction in 1902.¹³ Much has been made of the floating raft foundations of the building but this technology had been refined by John Wellborn Root in Chicago during the

1880s. The Luttrells' previous commission for the same company in Christchurch used reinforced concrete for the foundations and two-storey base and a steel frame for the upper five levels. This hybrid construction was noted at the time "being a compromise between the American steel frame and the ordinary colonial method."¹⁴ The Dunedin building, however, was built entirely from reinforced concrete and was monolithic, incorporating foundations, walls, floors and roof into a single structure. As reported in the *Otago Daily Times*

The structural part will be of reinforced concrete, the foundations, wall, stairs, columns, girders, floors and roof being made of that material ... The building itself when completed will resemble nothing so much as a huge floating box.¹⁵

Later in the article it is pointed out that "The entire work is under the supervision of Mr Alex Dall as inspector and Mr C. Fleming MacDonald as the builder." The remaining unanswered question is who provided the engineering design for this important project?

McDonald's rapid rise to prominence in Dunedin building circles is difficult to explain

¹⁰ McEwen "Luttrell, Alfred Edgar 1865-1924; Luttrell, Edward Sidney 1872 – 1932" np.

¹¹ Williamson *Farmers in Business* p 98.

¹² Anon. "Obituary, Mr W. H. Dunning" p 7.

¹³ *Cassell's Reinforced Concrete* p 10.

¹⁴ Anon. "Building Operations in Christchurch" p 9.

¹⁵ Anon. "The NZ Express Company's Building" p 8.

without more detailed research. As many in the architectural, engineering and building fields had done before, he came to the city from Melbourne. He was living in Stafford Street in 1906 and later resided in Princes St., St Kilda.¹⁶ Unlike local builders who generally started with modest projects and advanced gradually, McDonald had capital and quickly began to take on substantial contracts. His first major commission in Dunedin was a four-storey warehouse and sample rooms to the value of £6000 for E Stokes and Sons, a prominent firm of Dunedin tailors.¹⁷ This building was hemmed into a complex site behind the building line of Princes and Lower High Streets and was almost invisible from the street. While having no architectural pretensions, it was a daring feat of construction, employing thin exterior party walls of reinforced concrete supporting suspended timber floors.

How Dunning fitted into the Express Building project is unclear. He may have been employed to supervise the project on behalf of the architects or was engaged directly by

¹⁶ *Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* (1906) p 1220; *Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* (1917) p 1642.

¹⁷ Corporation of the City of Dunedin "Building Register" (1906) n. 771.

¹⁸ Letterhead of C Fleming McDonald & Co., 1916

McDonald. Both Dunning and McDonald shared space in the building once it was completed in 1910 and it would appear that McDonald's company then set out to tender for both the design and construction of further projects. The company's letterhead, drawn by Dunning, states that they were "Architectural Designers, Builders & Contractors. Specialists in Ferro-Concrete Construction."¹⁸ There were sound reasons for McDonald wishing to structure his company in this way, at least at the beginning. As he stated in a lecture presented at the University of Otago, and printed as series of articles on reinforced concrete in the journal *Progress*,

many a good design for reinforced concrete work has failed through the ignorance of those responsible for its erection ... It is a perfectly safe method of construction when carried out by those who have a theoretical as well as practical knowledge.¹⁹

The pairing combined Dunning's modern and sophisticated façade and spatial organisation with McDonald's progressive engineering and project management skills. Their next project

¹⁹ Jeffreys "Concrete Building Movement in Auckland" p 409.

²⁰ Corporation of the City of Dunedin "Building Register" (1910) n. 1169.

was an office for Chambers and Sons to Dunning's design in 1910 on the corner of Cumberland and Lower Stuart Streets. Once again, this was a tall Chicago style building with heavy brick columns and arched windows. This was a conventional structure, however, and built to a relatively modest budget of £9500.²⁰ Unlike Mason and Wales, which maintained a diverse practice ranging from small houses to hospital ward blocks, McDonald and Dunning seem to have waited for the big jobs and tendered aggressively for them, bringing in over £75,000 worth of work in a five-year period from Dunedin alone. Dunning appears to have been free to design other projects during this period but they were not built by McDonald. Likewise, McDonald tendered for work by other architects, notably coming to grief with Edmund Anscombe over the Hanover Street Baptist Church where McDonald's name has been chiselled off the foundation stone.²¹

In 1911, McDonald was awarded the contract for the new National Bank building. The *Otago*

²¹ The evidence of this is in public view on the building, cnr Hanover and Gt King Sts, and was pointed out to me by Christine McCarthy in 2004.

Witness newspaper reported that

The Directors of the National Bank of New Zealand have approved of the plans submitted by Messrs C. F. MacDonald and Co. of this city, for the new banking premises to be erected in Princes Street.²²

The article was accompanied by a perspective drawing of the Princes Street elevation that took an entire page of the illustrated section. While McDonald and Dunning may have been pleased with this publicity, others were not. Since its formation in 1902, the Otago Institute of Architects had been battling the newly constituted Builders Association, mainly over the terms of the standard contract and the separation of responsibilities between the three main branches of building, namely design, engineering and construction. The modern construction industry has its roots in the industrial revolution when engineers saw the potential for profit in private industry through building the roads, railways, bridges, canals, and factories demanded by industrialism. The weakening of the old trade guild system and the introduction of general contracting opened up the new field of entrepreneurial building. General contractors could bring various trades together under direct supervision, allowing

competitive bids and fixed prices to complete projects. By the mid-nineteenth century, the construction process had evolved from one in which the master builder had full control over the scope of the project, subject to the aesthetic satisfaction of the client or patron, to one in which the scope of the project was dictated by an uneasy balancing of the developer's budgetary constraints and the ambitions of the designer. The flaw in the system was that the designer's profit was itself dictated by the scope of the project and the efficiency with which the project was delivered. The Otago Institute of Architects recognised the potential for corruption inherent in this system and acted by attempting to ensure professional supervision on their projects and to enforce the separation of designing and building functions. In 1906 the NZIA recorded a motion that

this Institute strongly deprecates any of its members preparing plans for builders when such plans are to be set forth as the work of such builders and the personality of such member be hidden and that such action be deemed an offence under the "Department and Practice of Members" Clause of the by Laws of the Institute.²³

While the registration and licensing of architects is a feature of late nineteenth century reformism aiming to improve conditions in society through more efficient building, it is also a strategy by which professional groups could combine and protect their interests. There is little doubt that the Otago branch of the profession was endangered by competition from both inside and out. Following the ruinous depression of the 1880s, what significant projects there were in Dunedin were more often than not going to firms outside the city. Architectural competitions loosened the grip of local architects on major projects while the state actively asserted its design role through the Government Architect's office. The expensive rebuilding of the Dunedin Railway Station, Law Courts, Prison and other government buildings in Lower High Street had not involved local architects at all. The established firms hung grimly on to their traditional clients. Mason and Wales worked for the Dunedin Hospital while the aggressive and highly competitive Edmund Anscombe began a long association with the University of Otago. At the same time as the challenge of increasing competition from

²² Anon. "Local and General" p 30.

²³ 18 December 1906, New Zealand Institute of Architects, Council Meetings, Minute Book pp 18, 20.

within the profession was met at the local level, architects were concerned to drive "builder-architects" out of the business. At the meeting of the Institute in October 1902, it was recorded that:

The builders have formed an Association, and are holding conferences with a view to the protection and advancement of their trade. We venture to submit that the interests of our profession need looking after also, and divided in small groups as we are at present, we have not the influence that a combined body should have.²⁴

Relations with the builders deteriorated to the point that in 1905 they threatened to refuse to tender for any work not covered under the terms of contract that they had approved.²⁵ A standard contract was finally agreed on in 1907 and this particular crisis was averted but the conflict clearly stung the Institute which did not enjoy having its hand forced. At the Annual General Meeting of the Institute that year, the President vented his frustration with the builders when he warned that "The builder-architect is still rather prominent and it

²⁴ 20 October 1902, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

²⁵ 27 September 1905, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

²⁶ Annual Report, 1907, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

is hoped that some means will before long be adopted to put him out of existence."²⁶ Anscombe, who fitted the definition "builder-architect" to a tee, decided the best option was to join the Institute and work from the inside.²⁷ As Christine McCarthy's research on Anscombe shows, his relations with the Institute were always troubled by his entrepreneurship. By 1910, the Otago Institute hoped that a common association might be formed from architects and engineers to more effectively counter the builders. This move was led by the engineer Henton Macaulay Davey, who was President of the Institute in 1911. In a jibe at his successor, J Louis Salmond wryly observed in his annual address in 1909 that

offence could be taken to engineers undertaking architect's work but the consolation from the architect's point of view was that engineers did not make a very good job of it.²⁸

McDonald and Dunning, however, were making a very good job of it and soon came under the scrutiny of the Institute. At a meeting

²⁷ List of Members, 1910, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

²⁸ Annual Meeting, 22 October 1909, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

²⁹ 3 February 1911, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

on January 19, 1911, the matter of the National Bank was discussed. The Committee considered "action" but struck this word out and substituted a "wish for more information."²⁹ There is no record of the issue that alarmed the committee but a letter was written to the Bank in March. Again, no reply was recorded. Davy's address at the 1911 AGM leaves little doubt that McDonald and Co. were the targets as he told the audience that:

Your Committee feels that the Institute should attempt to do something in the matter of the unbusinesslike practice of the employment of the Architect-Contractor (if he may be so called) that has arisen amongst us lately. It seems unaccountable that businessmen even, will entrust the erection of their buildings to firms, without any competitive tendering whatever, no checks on supervision, and pay 10% on the total cost of the work. It should be a recognised principle that the Architect's and the Builder's duties must be kept absolutely separate, as can only in that way can any possibility of corrupt practices be avoided.³⁰

McDonald may have been able to shrug this off but it is not surprising that Dunning might

³⁰ Annual Report, 25 October 1911, "Otago: Institute of Architects: Minute Book"

want to keep his head down while matters settled. The company mounted something of a defence in a 1913 article in *Progress* following the bank's completion. It points out that:

In this instance, the firm that were responsible for the design of the building, Messrs. McDonald and Co., were also responsible for the actual constructional work, as they operate both as architects and builders. Although Messrs. McDonald and Co., we believe, insisted that the Bank should appoint overseers or supervisors to inspect the work as it proceeded, we understand that the offices thus created were merely nominal, and were recognised as such.³¹

Public accusations of corrupt practice were a serious concern and McDonald and Dunning's reputation undoubtedly suffered as a result of this conflict.

One of the main problems in the organisation of the profession was the fact that anyone could call themselves an architect. In fact, the Institute was very open and liberal about who it would accommodate under the term, not wishing to leave a powerful group outside who could successfully tender for work at a lower

rate than the Institute specified. As pointed out in a supportive editorial in the *Otago Daily Times* on the verge of the passing of the New Zealand Institute of Architects Act (1913),

At present no qualification is demanded or restriction imposed in New Zealand to regulate the practice of the profession of architecture and it is open to anyone, however lacking in special knowledge, or however unqualified otherwise to pose as an architect, and the public has no adequate or immediate means of distinguishing the competent from those who have many disqualifications.³²

It was clear that the word "architect" could not be protected under the act which states that "

Nothing contained in this section shall prevent or be deemed to prevent any person from practising as an architect or from using in connection with his business the word "architect"³³

The term "registered architect" was, however, protected as were the letters FNZIA and ANZIA. This was a narrow distinction for the public and clients to make and all the Institute could do was fume as lucrative projects were

being taken up by unregistered "contractor-architects" such as McDonald and Co.

Whatever the effect of this controversy on the business, the National Bank was the last project of this scale for McDonald and Co. in Dunedin and McDonald's focus soon shifted northwards. They completed a project for the Church of Christ in Christchurch in 1913 in Queen Anne style, highly redolent of the work Dunning had carried out with Alexander North in Tasmania,³⁴ and the Whanganui office of the New Zealand Express Company (1914),³⁵ but the absence of work in Dunedin following the National Bank is notable. Dunning began working independently from McDonald, having registered with the NZIA in October 1914.³⁶ The bravura feats of engineering ceased and Dunning's later work is assured but conservative. McDonald finally moved his operations to Auckland in 1915³⁷ but died in 1922, aged 52.³⁸ William Dunning continued to practice, quietly, in Dunedin.

³¹ Anon. "New Building for The National Bank" p 508.

³² Anon. "The Registration of Architects" p 4.

³³ "The New Zealand Institute of Architects Act (1913)" p 79.

³⁴ Emberson "Church of Christ" file no. 1854.

³⁵ Anon. "Building Notes" p 1130.

³⁶ New Zealand Institute of Architects "Register of Members" np.

³⁷ McDonald is listed as living in Milton Road, Mt Eden in the *Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* (1917) p 1594.

³⁸ Auckland City Council "Cemetery Records" np.

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