

# Otago: 150 Years of New Zealand's First University

Alison Clarke

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For 150 years there has been a University in Dunedin; the University of Otago was the first New Zealand University and was founded in 1869. Alison Clarke's detailed history covers all aspects of University life from its founding: student housing and life, all of the academic departments and the University's place in the world, including locally in Dunedin and its national impact.

Academics and research are fundamental to the functions of a University. A chapter is devoted to each department, from its establishment to the present day. Many departments were established on a shoe-string and were ambitious as well as responsive to need. The medical school and law departments were established in the 1870s with inaugural lectures in 1875 and 1873 respectively. As a semi-outsider, Dunedin resident but not an Otago alumnus, these are the two departments for which I knew it best. I was surprised to learn that Otago was the first University in New Zealand to offer a MBA programme because it is easy to fall into the mindset of Auckland and Wellington as the business centres of the country, but Otago has a long pioneering history as a commercial centre and therefore I think my surprise was unwarranted.

Clarke's book is filled with interesting facts and demonstrations of the changing education landscape. This was especially apparent in the languages offered by the humanities department, with German

dropping in popularity during WWI, Russian rising in popularity after WWII but decreasing over time and ending in the 1990s. The University offered a Te Reo Māori class from 1957 but it did not establish a Māori studies department until the 1990s. The humanities department has more recently suffered through several restructures and several subjects moved to the sciences, including geography and psychology.

In some areas such as computing Otago was behind the times in comparison to Auckland and Canterbury; in other areas it was ahead. The sciences have seen huge shifts in the 150 year history of the institution through wider societal influences such as the boom and fall of the mining industry, while changing social structures are reflected in the home sciences area. The sciences are fundamental to much of Otago's work and reputation including the Dunedin<sup>1</sup> and Christchurch<sup>2</sup> longitudinal studies.

The support services include the library (which had only 500 volumes in 1872), the student health centre, disability services, Māori centre and Pacific Island centre. All of these are valuable resources which have grown significantly since their establishment. Clarke's book contains many examples, since the change in the 1970s to a focus on equal opportunities, of these areas being fulfilled by the people they are intended to represent, meaning that the engagement between community groups inside and outside the University has been enhanced.

The history and architecture of the University includes some excellent photographs, though I would have appreciated a map of the campus as it is today<sup>3</sup>. Appendices 2 and 3 detail the changing names and uses of the residential colleges and University buildings. The flooding of the Water of Leith<sup>4</sup> is not only a present day problem as shown by a one storey addition of the Dental School being lost to the waters in the 1923 flood<sup>5</sup>.

The chapter on student accommodation dovetails nicely with Sarah Gallagher's "Scarfie Flats" book also reviewed in this issue of *Archifacts* and shows that poor quality housing has been a constant problem through the University's existence. The chapter about student life is the one which interested me most from the outset as,

anecdotally, I think of most of the students as being very party focused. Clarke showed that there's far more to student life at Otago than drinking and couch fires.

Clarke is able to present relatively dry information, perhaps of most interest to those who experienced it themselves, in an easy-to-read manner with engaging stories, pictures, and facts which tie together into an interesting read. It touches on all of the elements for which the University is known from its academics to student culture. The University has grown from small precarious foundations to a flourishing institution supported by the wider community, which is responsive to change (sometimes ahead of the curve and sometimes behind) but which is certainly not stagnant. As someone who previously knew almost nothing about the history of the University, and who did not study at Otago, the read is enlightening.

Reviewed by Claire Dowling

#### Endnotes

- 1 <https://dunedinstudy.otago.ac.nz>
- 2 <https://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/research/healthdevelopment>
- 3 <https://www.otago.ac.nz/propertyservices/otago635301.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/108716716/wintry-conditions-set-to-continue-as-heavy-snow-and-rain-forecast-for-south-island>
- 5 <https://flickr/p/qgNmqX>