

THE DUNEDIN BURNS CLUB

Emeritus Professor Erik Olssen, in *A history of Otago*¹ noted that the Scottish-New Zealand poet John Barr of Craigielea (1809–1889) helped found a Burns Club in Otago after migrating from Scotland in 1852. The date of institution of the Club was 1861 according to the list of the Burns Clubs and Scottish Societies on the Roll of the Burns Federation in the *Robert Burns Chronicle*² published by The Burns Foundation, Kilmarnock, Scotland. The Club, number 69 on the roll, joined the Burns Federation in 1894. However the path of the Club between 1861 and 1894 was not all plain sailing. John Barr died in Dunedin on 18 September 1889 and is buried in the Northern Cemetery, Dunedin. At some stage after the Club's founding in 1861 it became inactive.

However, as noted in the 1991 centennial history of the Club, *The Burns Heritage: a history of the Dunedin Club*, by Lenore Satterthwaite, interest in Burns was revived followed the unveiling of the Robert Burns statue in the Octagon, Dunedin, on 24 May 1887 by Miss Burns, the daughter of Arthur Burns and a great-grandniece of the poet.³ Almost five years later, on 26 February 1891, a meeting was called by Arthur Burns to again form a Burns Club.³ It was attended by 34 members of the Caledonian Society, who were described as “men of great faith and purpose”.³ Innovatively, Mr Burns suggested that ladies should be admitted as members but the proposal was not favourably received.³ Dr Stenhouse hailed with great pleasure the initiation of the Burns Club and agreed with Mr Burns that their aims should be high and serious.³ He considered that studying Burns would allow learning about both Scottish history and the Scottish language, which he thought was in danger of dying out.³ Dr Stenhouse looked upon the poet as a man of first-rate ability who had taught the doctrine of the universal brotherhood of mankind and that this was destined to have a great influence over the destinies of mankind.³ He also took the view that the study of the writings of Burns and Scottish history would allow the younger generation to be able to participate in some of the great memories connected with Scottish history that had had so much to do with Scottish character.³

Thus it was decided to form a Burns Club again, an interim committee drew up a constitution, and the new constitution was adopted, together with the election of officers, on 18 March 1891.³ The position of president was filled by Mr Arthur Burns, the son of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Burns, who in turn was a son of Gilbert Burns and nephew of the poet.³ The Vice Presidents were Dr. Stenhouse and Mr John Gillies.³

Lenore Satterthwaite observed that the Dunedin Burns Club decided to try a new approach towards honouring the memory of the bard.³ While traditional observances in other countries seemed to centre around an anniversary dinner at which the poet's name was lauded in a “fou and unco happy” atmosphere, the Dunedin Burns Club was ambitious and aimed for a higher “wholesome” tone.³ It formed a choir and designed its own programme that would be both interesting and educational.³ Meetings were to be held monthly to foster various aspects of Scottish culture.³ Another departure from tradition, early in the Club's history, was to admit women as Club members.³ The Committee wanted to popularise the Club and thought that ladies and families should have a greater share in the Club's celebrations, thereby encouraging “homely social entertainment” for all.³ This decision proved very successful and women have since played important roles in the Club's activities.³

Lenore Satterthwaite recorded, in 1991, that the Club has an enviable record in the presenting over 1000 monthly concerts.³ Although the function of the Club was to keep alive the songs and poetry of Scotland's national bard, it had tried to accommodate as many tastes as possible by providing, at the concerts, a wide variety of Scottish entertainment including songs,

recitations and instrumental numbers.³ The Club also sought to encourage young artists with the hope that this would foster in young New Zealanders not only a love of the works of Burns but also an awareness of the nation and heritage.³

New members are most welcome. The annual membership fees are: single \$10, membership for all the family \$12. Application forms are available at the Club's website <http://www.dbci.blogtown.co.nz>

The membership fee can be posted to the Club Treasurer:

Dunedin Burns Club (Inc), 1 Spencer Street, Anderson Bay, Dunedin 9013

or paid by direct credit internet banking to:

The Dunedin Burns Club Inc, 020900 00523 7500

and the details of the application E-mailed to the Treasurer: Frances Brodie, E-mail: FrancesE@xtra.co.nz

The Club has many fewer members now than it had at its membership peak of 800, when it was the third largest separate Burns club in the world, but endeavours to keep the spirit of the Club alive in its activities which include supporting an annual Burns Supper or Dinner on 25 January in conjunction with Otago Settlers Museum Toitu; supporting the Robbie Rocks competition organised by the Otago Settlers Museum Toitu; supporting a Burns Song Section of the Senior Vocal Festival of the Otago Performing Arts Competitions Society; supporting the Robert Burns Poetry Competition in conjunction with the Dunedin Public Libraries, the Dunedin City Council, the Department of Irish and Scottish Studies of the University of Otago, and the Otago Daily Times; supporting the activities of the Otago Scottish Heritage Council Inc.; supporting the annual Robert Burns Lecture of the Department of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Otago; and supporting the St Andrews Day celebrations in the Octagon on the Sunday closest to the 30th of November in conjunction with the Dunedin-Edinburgh Sister City Society. The Club maintains memberships of the Robert Burns World Federation and the Robert Burns Association of the Pacific Rim and welcomes the interest in Dunedin's Scottish heritage shown by visitors to the city from Scotland. The Club organized a Scottish Festival in Dunedin in conjunction with the annual general meeting in Dunedin of the Robert Burns Association of the Pacific Rim on 3 September 2014 and hopes to organize similar events in the future in conjunction with the St Andrews Day celebrations around the 30th of November. The Club's website at <http://www.dbci.blogtown.co.nz> has some information about the activities of the Club in recent years, links to the Robert Burns World Federation and its newsletters, and copies of the financial reports, annual reports and minutes of the AGMs. The financial reports for 2015 and 2016 and the 2014 Scottish Festival are available at [Financial statements, audited for 2015 and 2016, and final financial statement for the Scottish Festival 2014](#). The annual report for 2016 is available at [Annual report Dunedin Burns Club 2016](#).

The Club is also endeavouring to keep alive the tradition of holding Scottish Concerts with encouragement for younger artists and has had one or two concerts annually in recent years. The Club would like to expand its social programme, including historical, literary and musical items as well as topics of general Scottish interest, and welcomes new members, including on to the committee, to assist with this. Please apply to join if you are interested. General enquiries can be directed to the secretary Bruce Spittle, E-mail: spittle@es.co.nz

References:

1. Olssen E. A history of Otago. Dunedin: John McIndoe; 1984. p. 43.
2. Veitch J, editor. Burns chronicle and club directory, instituted 1891, published annually, third series: volume XII. Kilmarnock, Scotland; The Burns Federation; 1963.
3. Satterthwaite L. The Burns heritage: a history of the Dunedin Club. Dunedin: The Dunedin Burns Club; 1991.