

Otago: 150 years of New Zealand's first university*Alison Clarke*

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This book offers a “panoramic view” (p. 7) of the history of New Zealand’s first university, the University of Otago. Across the 14 chapters, Clarke takes the reader on an archival, oral and visual journey of the history of this institution, its staff, students and community. The story of the University of Otago is set against the social, economic and political background of the time and as such affords the reader a glimpse into New Zealand’s colonial and contemporary history. Drawing on extensive archival evidence, Clarke examines “the university’s many milestones and successes, but also the very real challenges it faced” (p. 7). A key strength of this text is the skilful interweaving of the archival data that further highlight the complex and at times, complicated, history of the university. The footnotes offer an audit trail of the research undertaken and the three appendices provide a geographical backdrop to the campus and its environs. Written to commemorate the first 150 years of the university, Clarke resists any temptation to offer a hagiographic view of the university and its peoples. As a result, this is a candid and engaging history that offers an important contribution to the university and its community for this chronological milestone.

The text is organised in broad themes and there is attention to chronology within each chapter. As such it is a departure from previous jubilee and centenary histories that structure the narrative chronologically and which pay close attention to the role and contribution of vice chancellors, chancellors, registrars and professors. Importantly, Clarke places emphasis on documenting those absent from previous accounts: namely the history of women staff and students, Māori and Pasifika students and staff. Clarke does confess in her Preface that she was unable to offer “space here for everybody” (p. 10) but nonetheless she recounts a number of stories from those in less than prominent institutional positions. The net impact is a history that is broadly inclusive and generous in its interpretation of events, people and challenges.

The Table of Contents introduces the reader to the book as well as the emphasis Clarke has placed on writing both an institutional and social history. Again, she departs from more conventional institutional histories, and students and staff, especially women staff, are afforded a prominence in this book. Their stories are the principal focus across Chapters 2–5. The next four chapters (Chapters 6–9) examine the academic curriculum and research, and equal attention is paid to the humanities (Chapter 6), sciences (Chapter 7), commerce (Chapter 8) and the health sciences (Chapter 9). There does not appear to be an outward or discernible focus on either the “heart” (Humanities) or the “engine room” (Sciences) of the university (p. 161). Across each of these chapters Clarke skilfully documents key historical events, the advent of new areas of study, and also notes the challenges various departments and members of staff encountered. The history and activities of a range of support services (Chapter 11) and teaching activities including extension classes (Chapter 12) are supplemented with recollections from staff and students. The photographs of the university campus and buildings (Chapter 13) offer visual evidence of the incremental and outward



development of the university not just around its immediate vicinity but into the city of Dunedin itself. Chapters 10 and 14 take the reader on a journey beyond the university and consider the university's place in the city of Dunedin, the Otago community, and importance to New Zealand and the Pacific. Clarke resists the temptation to focus on university rankings in a bid to offer a public relations account of the successes of the university and its peoples, but rather assertively examines whether the university continues to fulfil its mission. Drawing on a 2008 marketing tagline "Your place in the world", Clarke concludes this book with a critical appraisal of the importance of the university and its people to mana whenua (local community) and New Zealand as a Pacific nation.

There is an intellectual energy about this book. It is thoroughly researched, the writing is lively, and the author skilfully weaves the institutional narrative with more personal accounts of the everyday lives of students and staff. The accompanying photographs are a rich archival source and amplify the quality of the historical narrative and book design. There is an evident symphony of the visual and written elements in this book which move it beyond a traditional institutional history. A comprehensive and inclusive history that is an important contribution to the field.

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