



Balfour and Paterson

In Dunedin's Southern Cemetery stand side by side two Celtic crosses erected in memory of two friends whose lives were entwined and who died within days of each other.

James Balfour and Thomas Paterson were both born in Edinburgh and grew up there together.

When James Balfour, a brilliant young engineer, forsook his native Scotland in 1863 for the rigours of early life in this country he would not realize the part he was destined to play in the early history of New Zealand.

Born into the illustrious Stevenson family, who were renowned lighthouse builders and engineers, James was always going to follow the family tradition.

In 1863 James and Thomas responded to the Otago Provincial Government who were looking for a marine engineer and a road engineer.

Thomas arrived first and was appointed the Otago railway and road engineer. Balfour arrived later with his wife and daughter. Both friends lived near each other and worked out of offices in Princes Street.

The need for roads and railways in the Otago Province occupied Paterson's time.

Balfour was likewise loaded with work working on plans for lighthouses at Dog Island, Taiaroa Heads, and Cape Saunders, and proposals for harbours and docks throughout New Zealand. He was involved in engineering projects for the Great Exhibition.

It was in 1866 that James Balfour was appointed as General Governor Marine Engineer for the colony of New Zealand, and Superintendent of Lighthouses.

Thomas Paterson was appointed Chief Engineer for Railways for the Otago Province in 1865 and began planning for the rail route through the Taieri to Central Otago. The retention of our small gauge railway owes much to Paterson and Balfour.

By 1870 there were 1100 recorded drownings in New Zealand rivers alone, and the need to make river crossings and ship landings safer was a prime necessity for both engineers.

In late 1869 Balfour was in Timaru overseeing the construction of an experimental breakwater and work had been going on for two weeks when he received word of Thomas Paterson's death.

Thomas was returning to Dunedin on the Cobb and Co Coach Service with his plans for the Rangitata Bridge. There had been heavy rain, but the coach driver completed the first ford of the swollen Kakanui River without any trouble. But at the second ford, water started to fill the coach, and the driver turned back. Broadside to the current, the coach and horses were dragged 50 metres downstream. The lead horses made the bank but at this point the coach wrenched free and was swept away.

Remarkably, when the coach was washed ashore only two passengers were unaccounted for – a local schoolteacher and Thomas Paterson. The next day Thomas's body was found pinned under the coach.

Balfour was determined to make it back to Dunedin for the funeral on 19 December. The *Maori*, a steamer, was at anchor in the harbour channel bound for Dunedin. There was a nasty easterly swell running and the cargo could not be unloaded, but Balfour and other passengers decided to go aboard. A surfboat set out, but in the harbour it fouled a buoy and a lifeboat had to be launched from the steamer.

The passengers were transferred from boat to boat successfully and all was well until the lifeboat drew in alongside the *Maori*. The crest of a wave suddenly capsized the lifeboat. Lines and lifebuoys were thrown to the passengers and one by one they were hauled on board. By the time the line reached James he was too exhausted to hold on to it and drowned. His body was recovered from the beach several days later.

The rivers that Paterson worked to bridge claimed his life. The harbours Balfour worked to make safe claimed his life. It seems fatefully tragic that these men were claimed by the forces they were determined to conquer. Yet they had achieved in six years what many men would dream of achieving in a lifetime.

The friends are buried beside each other beneath lovely headstones imported from Scotland which are beautifully executed and suitably inscribed and still in very good condition.