



Alexander Mennie Braik, whose grave can be found in the Northern Cemetery, was the first choirmaster of Knox Church. Born in Huntly, Scotland, in about 1854, he was a Master Printer by trade, who worked for the Saturday Advertiser newspaper in Dunedin, and for J. Wilkie, before joining in partnership with D. S. Jolly. However, his chief renown comes from his contribution to Dunedin's musical history.

Braik was Precentor of Knox Church in the early 1880s, when the question of introducing organ music to the services was first being discussed. Traditionally, the Presbyterian Church only included psalms, sung without any instrumental accompaniment, and the role of the precentor was to lead the singing. When the organ was finally installed in 1884 Braik became both choirmaster and singing teacher, holding several training classes weekly, open to all church members and young people. The Report for 1890 stated that the classes had "an aggregate attendance of 300" and did "much to foster a taste for music, while at the same time they are educating the young people to take an efficient part in the service of song."

Braik taught his choristers the popular tonic solfa method, which used different names for different pitches rather than traditional musical notation. His pupils achieved a high standard of sight reading, and the Otago Witness noted that "...it is indeed encouraging to see that the Knox Church is at least setting a good example in making use of children's voices, and it is to be hoped that when some of these same children have acquired as good a knowledge of the staff-notation as they now have of the solfa notation they will become useful members of choirs and musical societies, and help to perform vocal music better than has ever been heard here yet."

In addition to his musical duties at Knox, Alexander Braik was also the conductor of the Dunedin Burns Club choir, and the musical director for two major Dunedin events. In 1898 he organised the Exhibition Choir of 600 children. In 1901 he

organised and conducted a massed choir of 3000 voices at the school's demonstration performed for the visiting Duke and Duchess of York, entertaining Royalty with such patriotic numbers as 'Red, white and blue', and 'The Empire's Flag'. He also taught singing at the Teachers' Training College, as the trainee teachers were required to pass this subject in order to get their teaching certificate.

Braik's wife Jeannie died in 1896, and two years later he married Mary Theresa Crompton of Christchurch. In April 1912 he was hit by a car in Stuart Street. He suffered serious injuries and died on October 26 at the age of 58.

Alexander Braik was described as a 'Scot through and through, loyal to his country and his God, well-versed in the literature of his country, and greatly attached to its music'. He shared his musical talents unstintingly, and contributed much to his community. It would surely please him to know that his Knox Church choir still thrives, and continues to participate in Sunday services, and perform major choral works. – Helen Gilmore

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(www.cemeteries.org.nz) by Helen Gilmore.

Sources: Issues of *Otago Witness and Tuapeka Times* www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz;

History of Knox Church, by John Hislop (1892)

City Of Dunedin, by K.C. McDonald

Biographical Details www.northerncemetery.org.nz