



Alexander Cairns, Inspector of Works to the Otago Provincial Government, was born in Menstrie, Perthshire, in 1813. He attended his local parish school before taking a stonemasonry apprenticeship in 1826. After a few years in that trade he went in to business at Bonnybrig, near Falkirk, as a brick and tile maker, and a manufacturer of chemical manures.

Cairns sailed to Victoria on the *Thetis* in 1852, and in Melbourne entered the iron trade as a partner in Cairns, Wilson and Amos. In 1860 this firm established Melbourne's first iron rolling works.

Cairns arrived in Dunedin aboard the *Aldinga* in 1862. Here he established an ironmongery, which he soon sold to Hugh MacNeil of Briscoe & Co. He then worked as a contractor before becoming the Provincial Government's Inspector of Works in 1867, a position he kept until the abolition of the provincial system in 1876.

Cairns served as a city councillor from 1884 to 1886. During his term he supported the reduction of corporation officials' salaries, lower city solicitors' fees, and reduction of the city's overdraft costs. He also advocated council purchase of riparian water rights on the Leith, stock grazing on the Town Belt, and lowering gas prices to make the system accessible to more people. During his final election campaign in the South Ward he referred to the 'shaking of the dry bones' in the city's governance. He was narrowly defeated by H.S. Fish jr.

A staunch temperance advocate, Cairns unsuccessfully sought election to licensing committees. When a license was sought for the Caledonian (later Rugby) Hotel he argued that

pubs were a 'pest to the neighbourhood, the destruction of the body and the ruin of the soul...[and] hells upon earth'. He said that instead of a proliferation of hotels, there should be coffee shops at every corner.

Cairns owned many properties Dunedin and in 1885 had at least 110 residential tenants. His buildings included Gladstone Terrace in Melville Street, built in 1880 and now registered as an historic place. On another of his surviving buildings, situated in Carroll Street, a reference to Cairns' birthplace can still be seen on the parapet: 'Menstrie 1886'.

Cairns married Henrietta Wilson of Jinkabout Mills, Linlithgowshire, and she died in 1873 at the age of 54. Alexander Cairns died at his home in Walker (now Carroll) Street on 10 December 1891, aged 79. He was survived by a family of grown-up sons and daughters, and his obituary in the *Otago Daily Times* recorded the loss of a large-hearted man and a warm friend. A plain but large monument marks the family burial place in the Southern Cemetery.

David Murray
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SOURCES:

Otago Daily Times, 15 January 1873, 3; 2 December 1885, 4; 8 September 1886, 2; 11 December 1891, 3