



Fels, Willi 1858 - 1946
Merchant, collector, philanthropist

Willi Fels was born on 17 April 1858 at Halle an der Weser, Brunswick, Germany, the eldest of four children of Heinemann Wilhelm Fels, a merchant, and his wife, Kätchen Hallenstein. He attended a Jewish school run by his father's cousin, Albert Fels. He later went to school in Hildesheim where, influenced by his physics teacher, he lost his religious belief. Willi hoped to study history and classical languages at university but chose instead to follow his father's wishes and manage the family woollen mill at Neuhaus, near Paderborn. He was, nevertheless, to retain his interest in history and Classics throughout his life.

Fels's uncle, Bendix Hallenstein, had been a prominent merchant in Otago, New Zealand, since 1863. In 1881 he visited Germany with his wife and four daughters, one of whom, Sara Elizabeth, Fels married at Bad Pyrmont, on 8 November 1881; they were to have three daughters and one son. The couple lived in Neuhaus until 1888, when they came to Dunedin. Willi Fels joined his father-in-law in business at the head office of Hallenstein Brothers, eventually becoming the managing director of this firm and of the Drapery and General Importing Company of New Zealand (DIC). He held directorships in other firms and travelled extensively throughout New Zealand on business.

Fels had begun collecting stamps and coins as a boy. Soon after arriving in New Zealand he began to collect Maori and Oceanic artefacts and mastered the techniques of archaeological

prospecting at Maori sites on the Otago beaches of Little Papanui, Murdering Beach and Long Beach. He also collected arms, ceramics, decorative art and ethnographic objects from Tibet, Persia, India, Burma and Japan. In later life he concentrated on his collection of Greek and Roman coins and English coins and medals. He built up a library, principally of Greek and Roman history and literature, but which also included books by the early Italian printers as well as first editions of some contemporary English authors.

Many members of his extended family had emigrated from Germany and lived near each other in and around London Street: among them Fels himself, his father-in-law and his cousins, the de Beers. Fels's home, Manono, was filled with his collection and he loved to entertain those who shared his interests. Peter Buck and John Macmillan Brown visited when they were in Dunedin. Fels also took great pleasure in his garden, for which he had brought flowers and shrubs from Italy and Greece, as well as Central Otago alpine plants and North Island trees, ferns and shrubs collected on his travels.

Fels's eldest daughter, Helene Brasch, died in 1914 and his wife, Sara, in 1918. After his only son, Harold, was killed in action at the battle of Broodseinde on 4 October 1917, Fels decided that his collections should be given to the community, and commenced his long association with the Otago Museum. In 1918 he secured the appointment of H. D. Skinner to the joint position of lecturer in anthropology in the university and assistant curator of the museum, paying half his salary until 1923. He also organised and was a major contributor towards an endowment fund in 1921 to extend the museum's ethnological collections, and a building fund that culminated in the erection of the Fels wing in 1930. Later, and until his death in 1946, he became chairman of the museum management committee.

He eventually donated some 80,000 pieces, including 5,400 coins, and made monetary gifts of more than £25,000. In his last years he spent much time methodically arranging and cataloguing the coin collection. The establishment of the Melanesian, Polynesian and Maori collections was largely due to his zealous efforts. The department of coins and medals is almost entirely his gift and he was by far the greatest benefactor of the Classical and Far Eastern collections. To the library of the University of Otago he also presented 400 of his most valuable books, including illuminated manuscripts, incunabula and rare first editions.

Willi Fels had always been interested in the natural sciences and was a member of the Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club. He spent many holidays in western Otago, engaging in tramping and 'minor mountaineering'. The Helena Falls and Emily Pass are named after two of his daughters. In 1936 he was appointed a CMG for his services to the community. He died in Dunedin on 29 June 1946, survived by two of his daughters.

Humane, tolerant, of wide sympathies and sceptical curiosity, Willi Fels inspired a love of artistic and intellectual interests in others - notably his grandson Charles Brasch. His donations to the Otago Museum, which helped to broaden its collections beyond their origins in natural science and ethnography, are a memorial to his devotion to the civilisation of his native Europe and his feeling for his adopted country.