



Alfred Charles Hanlon was one of the most outstanding criminal advocates in New Zealand's history. Born in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 1 August 1866, he was the son of Elizabeth Louisa Bingham and her husband, William Dudgeon Hanlon, who had emigrated to New Zealand in 1862 from County Donegal, Ireland. William Hanlon was at first a boatman and later a member of the Irish and the Otago constabularies.

Bluff, Halliwell's and Albany Street schools, Port Chalmers District High School and Otago Boys' High School were all attended with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the young Hanlon. At the age of 15 he was articled to J. A. D. Adams as a law clerk, and after six years he was admitted as a barrister and solicitor by J. S. Williams in December 1888. On qualifying, Hanlon's position with Adams was no longer available and he was forced to set up his own legal practice. In his autobiography, *Random recollections* (1939), he describes being 'thoroughly daunted' by having to wait five long months for the appearance of his first client.

On 20 June 1894, at Dunedin, Alf Hanlon married Mary Ann Hudson (known as Polly), the daughter of Mary Riley and Richard Hudson, founder of the Dunedin biscuit-making firm R. Hudson and Company. Three daughters and a son were born to the couple.

Hanlon's career extended over more than 50 years; his appointment as King's counsel was announced on 14 April 1930. He was an impressive figure both in stature (he was over six feet tall) and as a court advocate. His examination and cross-examination of witnesses and his address to the jury were legendary, and when word circulated around Dunedin that Hanlon

was to appear, the downstairs area of the Dunedin Supreme Court would fill with members of the profession, and the gallery with the public. His practice was not limited to Dunedin, however; he appeared in courts throughout the country.

Ironically, the case which significantly enhanced Hanlon's growing reputation, and that for which he is best remembered, is the only one of his 16 or more murder trials as senior counsel in which his client did not escape the hangman's noose. This was the trial in 1895 of Minnie Dean, the Winton 'baby farmer'. In summing up, the judge, J. S. Williams, told the jury that if they accepted the view contended by counsel – that the death of the child in Minnie Dean's care amounted to manslaughter only – it would be nothing short of 'a weak-kneed compromise'. It was said at the time that the guilty verdict was the only one that could have been returned, but that the accused had, against great odds, been most ably and skilfully defended. In fact, Hanlon's address was so impassioned that the judge adjourned for the day before summing up, to allow the jury time for calm consideration.

Another notable case was the charge against Thomas Kerry and others for allegedly casting away the yacht *Ariadne* at the mouth of the Waitaki River in 1901. Hanlon and Charles Skerrett (later chief justice) appeared for Kerry, the owner of the vessel. The Crown's case relied on a document signed by Kerry agreeing to pay the captain to have the ship wrecked. Hanlon suspected that the document was a forgery. In a remarkable example of the early use of scientific forensic evidence, he had a photograph made of the exhibit which was enlarged and thrown onto a screen, revealing that the incriminating words had been added to the original document. The Crown counsel then decided to withdraw the document as evidence. Hanlon's address to the jury was perhaps his best ever speech in a criminal case, and an acquittal was assured.

Although he made his name as a criminal advocate, Hanlon's practice extended beyond criminal law. Divorce cases constituted a large proportion of his work. Having made a close study of navigation and nautical astronomy (he held a river limit captain's certificate), he was involved in nautical litigation. In 1899 he acted for the government in examining witnesses before the Marine Commission, which was appointed to inquire into alleged irregularities within the Marine Department. He achieved the exoneration of the premier, Richard Seddon, and the minister of marine, William Hall-Jones.

As Hanlon's practice grew so too did his love of Shakespeare; indeed, at one time he seriously considered acting as a career. Elocution and dramatic recital seduced him. He was a founding member and president of the Dunedin Competitions Society and president of the Dunedin Shakespeare Club, making his mark as a character actor. He was also president of the Dunedin Orphans' Club. Sport occupied much of Hanlon's leisure time; he lived by the belief that healthy bodies and sound minds are the first essentials of citizenship. He was involved, often serving as president, in the administration of rugby, cricket, golf, boating, boxing and horse-racing.

He was president of the Otago District Law Society in 1902 and 1914 – one of the few to hold this position more than once. He resolutely refused to become involved in local or national politics, however; in 1900 he declined an invitation from Seddon to join his party and stand for Parliament.

Hanlon abhorred class distinction and snobbery, and was a staunch atheist. He was a man of infinite jest, with a penchant for gambling, and was well known for the sprig of boronia that

he habitually wore in his buttonhole. He died at Dunedin on 6 February 1944, aged 77, and was buried at Andersons Bay cemetery. Polly Hanlon had died on 23 January 1940.

Hanlon's success rested on a combination of dramatic talent, intuition and strategy. He had a commanding presence, was a shrewd judge of character, and, while possessing a rich and expressive vocabulary and an eloquent and forcible oratorical style, had the ability to dominate without contempt. He knew instinctively when to stop short of condemnation in order to safeguard respect. While possessing the ability to assimilate rapidly the details of a case, he addressed the jury in simple terms, and highly prized the right of final address. Blending passion with dignity he relied on warmth of expression and dramatics for success.

Geoffrey G. Hall. 'Hanlon, Alfred Charles', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 8-Oct-2013  
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2h11/hanlon-alfred-charles>