

Samuel Marsh was buried in an unmarked
grave in the Paupers' Section of Dunedin's Northern Cemetery

On Saturday evening, 4 March, 1882, about a quarter-past five o'clock, the dead body of a man named Samuel Marsh was discovered in the back room of a house situate in Castle Street near St Andrew Street. At first it was thought that the deceased had committed suicide, as several bottles of laudanum and opium were found on the table, but on Dr Copland examining the body, he stated that there were no signs of actual poisoning, but it was evident that the deceased had died from slow poison caused by taking soporiferous tinctures. The deceased was a native of England, a mining engineer, and a professed Freethinker. He came to this city about three months ago from the Bay of Islands with his son, who departed for Sydney about a fortnight ago. The following note was found on the table:

"I wish my body may not have a Christian service read over it. I wish my body to be cast into the ocean and not covered with thick calico. The above is my wish – Samuel Marsh." In reference to the note, however, the landlord of the house (Mr Russell) states that it was written a few days previously, he having seen and read it. The deceased was in the habit of talking of the manner in which he would like his body disposed of when he died. He was also supposed to be affected in the brain, for on several occasions he asserted to Mr Russell that he had received visits from certain celebrities, amongst whom was the Duke of Wellington. The room in which he was found was in a disgraceful condition. It is a pity there is not a law enforcing people to keep their houses clean.

During the past week, a considerable amount of amusement has been caused in this city by the rumour that the Freethought Association had engaged the Rev. Mr Gillies to bring disgrace on and make religion look ridiculous by the lectures he recently delivered in the Temperance Hall on scientific subjects. It is stated that the rumour originated through a well-known gentleman who is very fond of saying that the rubbish which he (Mr Gillies) spoke during the course of his lectures was a disgrace to the cause of Christianity. These words, like the black substance from which the tale of the three black crows originated, soon generated into ludicrous rumour of Mr Gillies' engagement with the Freethought Party. Hence the fun. Of course the statement has been refuted both by the Freethought Association and members of the Presbyterian body; but it has nevertheless been looked upon as a good joke, and no little banter has taken place over the subject matter in certain quarters.

This is a story "with no stone". Samuel Marsh was buried in an unmarked grave in the Paupers' Section of Dunedin's Northern Cemetery. This was the inevitable fate of anyone who had no friends or relatives willing or able to pay for a plot and a marker to give the deceased a proper burial. In many cases the sexton, to minimise his work, would sometimes inter four or five unrelated pauper's bodies in the one grave site.

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