

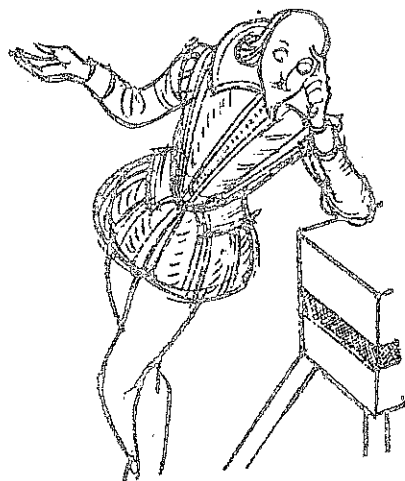
DUNEDIN AND THE BARD



*The Tuatara and a
Shakespeare Club Are
N.Z. Contribution To
World Antiquities . . .*

by

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COMPILING a list of the oldest things in the world to be found in New Zealand, most people would probably start off hopefully with the tuatara lizard, and then begin to look blank. Few would be likely to consider New Zealand as possessing anything in the theatre world that could be included under such a heading.

Yet the Dunedin Shakespeare Club, with 61 years of life, is the oldest organisation of its kind in the world. The discovery was made when the Dunedin club affiliated with the British Empire Shakespeare Society in 1932. It is an enviable record—a remarkable record. For the club has never at any time read plays by any other than Shakespeare. Despite the thousand and one counter-attractions of recent years, the Dunedin Shakespeare Club has gone only from strength to strength. It is stronger today than it has ever been.

Up curtain on the past. . . .

THE scene, the Dunedin Athenaeum. The time, Wednesday, October 17, 1877.

Eight men are present, founders of the Shakespeare Reading Club. Twelve rules were drawn up, the most important being "The object of the club is the promotion of the study of Shakespeare, and the cultivation of the art of reading aloud." (That is still the most important rule of the club.) Mr. Justice H. S. Chapman is elected president, and it is decided to study "Hamlet," the proceeds obtained from a public reading to be devoted to the Indian Famine Relief Fund. But the proceeds go to the Benevolent Institution; £30 being collected.

Keeping in mind the traditions of the Shakespearean stage, in the early years all parts were read by men, and women were debarred from membership. At the first public reading of "Much Ado About Nothing," the part of Beatrice was taken by Mr. Alfred Burton, one of the club's founders, and a man six feet tall! Still the club flourished.

Mr. Burton was a prominent figure in the history of the club. He was popular with audiences, acting his parts with conviction. There were times when the club was threatened with dissolution, but Mr. Burton's enthusiasm held things together. He was responsible for the inclusion in the club's repertoire of plays that were deemed too hard for reading, himself taking the leading parts in plays considered "impossible," and proving they were possible. He was given a complimentary benefit performance in May, 1904.

TRIBUTE must also go to Mr. T. W. Whitson, yet another foundation member, who was as enthusiastic as Mr. Burton. He served 45 years in all, and his influence was marked. He was president from 1906 until 1922, the year of his death.

Then there was Alexander Wilson, M.A., president from 1899 until 1906. He enjoyed a reputation for scholarliness that was justified. He aided the club's prestige through the publication of a volume, "Short Studies in Shakespeare," based on addresses given prior to a reading, in which explanations and comments on the work were made.

WITHOUT public support the club must have died between 1887 and 1890. Those were lean years generally, and Dunedin was in the deepest of the doldrums. Financial support was scanty, and in March, 1887, an appeal for support had to be made through the city Press. By 1890 conditions had become so bad that the records of one meeting state that the suggestion arose "that the propriety of closing the club be seriously debated." Rather unexpectedly 20 new active and several honorary members stepped forward, and the club was saved—saved, not temporarily, but for all time.

It is impossible in an article that must be as brief as this one to refer to all those citizens who took an active interest in this remarkable organisation. The list of presidents, chairmen and lecturers reads like something out of Debrett.

Commencing with Mr. Justice Chapman, there were Chief Justice Prendergast, Mr. Justice Johnston, Mr. Justice Williams, Sir Robert Stout, Dean Fitchett, Professors Mainwaring, Brown, Salmond, Gilray, and the Revs. R. W. Fairclough, and Saunders. Active members included Sir Frederick Chapman, Sir William Sim, Mr. Richard Hudson, Dr. William Brown, Mr. G. C. Israel, Mr. J. B. Callan, Mr. Justice Callan, Mr. Fred. Calvert, Mr. J. C. Stephens, and Mr. A. C. Hanlon, who has been regarded as one of the greatest barristers New Zealand has ever known.

FROM the time Mr. Hanlon was elected an active member in 1890, it might truly be said that Mr. Hanlon was the Dunedin Shakespeare Club. He was a "draw," a born actor, a born reader, an enthusiast. A Shakespeare reading was not complete unless Mr. Hanlon was playing the lead, and he was at home in any part, but (Contd. on page 46.)

THIS is what that outstanding K.C., Mr. A. C. Hanlon, says about the Dunedin Shakespeare Club: "I consider that any success I have had in swaying opinion as I wished it swayed, whether addressing a jury or any other audience, has been derived from the experience I obtained in reading aloud the works of Shakespeare. I would strongly recommend any young barrister to gain experience that way."