

# The Days of Sail

*Bill Manhire*

There is a photograph of early Dunedin, taken from the top of the Town Hall in 1883. It shows the lower side of the Octagon: the mouth of Lower Stuart Street to the left, of Princes Street to the right. In the middle distance, and probably the photographer's subject, First Church stands on its hillock. Beyond it you can make out reclaimed land and warehousing. Further off the masts of ships lift above the harbour.

The photograph was taken by John R. Morris. You can find it in a book of early Dunedin photographs from the Hardwicke Knight collection. 'People and vehicles,' says an accompanying note, 'have moved during the time exposure so that the streets appear empty.'

And it is true: the small town is like a child's model. Spires and shopfronts; a Sunday morning silence; a place which will never have a human population. It is possible to guess where people may have been: that faint blur, there, on the pavement; those marks that look like brushstrokes on the surface of the road. In fact, if you gaze carefully—as I am gazing now—you will see that one or two human figures have persisted. A tiny man stands outside Smith and Smith, next to a horse. On the corner of Princes Street and the Octagon another man stands in front of W. Absolon Smith, Tailor. He wears a dark suit and hat, and is staring intently towards the centre of the Octagon. He looks as if he is watching a procession, or waiting at a

set of traffic lights. But of course in the Dunedin of 1883 there is no such thing as a set of traffic lights.

The lower half of the photograph is history. But the upper half is sky: a uniform white, a white wholly without blemish, intruded upon only by the slender, ascending spire of First Church. It is tempting to imagine that the photographer stared out from the top of Dunedin Town Hall at a cloudless nineteenth-century blue: cerulean. But there must have been clouds. They would have been moving too fast for the camera to take them in.

The Queen looks down from her high window above Princes Street. What a dump, she thinks. What a ghastly hole.

The empty streets.

Some man is telling her that Dunedin means 'Eden on the hill'. He is explaining that she is visiting a city of firsts.

The skirl of the pipes. A highland band goes by. Snap. The Queen takes a photograph. *Ho-ro you nutbrown maiden.*

Yes, says the civic dignitary, who stands slightly behind his monarch, speaking over her shoulder, we can for example lay claim to the nation's first university, the University of Otago, founded 1869.

A haka party goes by on the deck of a lorry. *Snap.*

We can also boast the first secondary school for girls, indeed the first in the Empire, 1870.

Commonwealth, says the Queen. She waves.

The empty streets. A brass band goes by. *Snap.*

The first woollen mills, 1874. The first daily newspaper, 1861. The first shipment of frozen meat home to the old country, aboard a ship named for our city, the *Dunedin*, 1882.

Marching girls. *Snap*. A band of assassins. *Snap*.

Why, says the civic dignitary, the list is endless.

I am told, remarks the Queen, that on its first voyage the *Dunedin* carried in all the carcasses of some 4,908 sheep and lambs.

I believe so, ma'am.

(The Queen is always extensively briefed on these visits.)

And that after nine further voyages the *Dunedin* was lost without trace in the year 1890, perhaps, some believe, having struck an iceberg off the Cape of Good Hope. And that she and all her complement and cargo now rest in a watery grave.

I believe so, ma'am. Also the first kindergarten, St Andrew's Hall, 1889.

A line of lorries goes by. Local actors are dressed to represent the first professors of the University.

The Professor of Classics. *Snap*. The Professor of Mathematics, at a blackboard. *Snap*. The Professor of Mental Science. *Snap*. The Professor of English Language and Literature. *Snap*. The Professor of Natural Philosophy. *Snap*. Chemistry. *Snap*. Biology. *Snap*. Mining and Mineralogy. *Snap*. Anatomy and Physiology . . .

But the Queen has run out of film.

Ours too was the first School of Medicine in the land, says the civic dignitary. To us it fell also to appoint the first woman professor in New Zealand, Professor W.L. Boys-Smith, head of the faculty of Home Science.

But the Queen has run out of small talk.

She turns from the window and addresses one of her security men.

Tell me, she says, what has four legs and goes 'tick-tock'?

Ma'am?

A watchdog, says the Queen.

It could be anyone at all in that 1883 photograph, standing outside a tailor's shop on the corner of Princes Street and the Octagon, just across from the spot where the Star Fountain once played music in the evenings. As it happens, I believe the man may be my great-grandfather, Priam Murphy, after whom I am named. A sense of remoteness makes him look older than the thirty-three years he would have been then.

In the photograph you can see that small trees and shrubs have been recently planted in the Octagon. I am also certain it is these trees at which my great-grandfather is staring so intently. Each is encircled by a fence, about waist-high. Not much can be done about the wind, but at least the young trees can be protected from the deprivations of browsing wagon-horses and wandering stock. Strange to say, the greatest danger comes from boys playing football. They do not care where they run, or on what they trample. There are no flowerbeds in the Octagon in 1883, and for good reason.

My great-grandfather is keeping an eye on the trees and shrubs. After all, he had a hand in planting them. It is a thankless task. Most passers-by find him amusing. Yet he will have his reward, although he does not know this yet.

Just at the moment, however, he cannot see the boys chasing after the flying ball. He cannot see the horse which suddenly panics when it is struck by a ball outside Smith and Smith. Everything is moving too fast to leave any impression.

In Great King Street, not far from the Captain Cook Hotel, there are several buildings which belong to the university's School of Medicine. The building with which I am associated has an official name and street number,

but most people know it as ‘The Sheep-Dip’. Few could tell you why. Most would say it was one of those funny, local names. Perhaps in early days settlers had a sheep-dip there . . .

The Sheep-Dip is seven storeys high. It has as many floors as Dunedin’s—and New Zealand’s—first skyscraper, the Mutual Funds Building, erected in 1910.

My name is Priam Murphy, and each day I make my way to the seventh floor of the Sheep-Dip to see to the current residents.

The room is large, rectangular. One wall boasts a portrait of the Queen, red-jacketed and side-saddle, on her horse Burmese. If, like John R. Morris a hundred years ago, I want to look out across the city, I must clamber over the double aluminium farm gates which cut the room in two, edge my way past half a dozen drowsy sheep and stare out through a small window. Then there is a view of the far side of the harbour. Grey of water, green of hills, cloudy blue of sky. In front and to the right are hospital buildings. If I crane my neck a little, I can see to the left the Museum Reserve and the main entrance to the museum itself.

Each day I sweep and shovel shit away. Sheep have tidy droppings, so it is not a particularly messy business. I set down food—artificial mixtures, some of it in granule form, some of it a rough mash pudding which I make up myself from a base of pulped swede turnip. I examine scars and check for newcomers.

I look to see who might be missing. How is Princess Anne today? And where is the Queen Mother?

I look under the straw, too, to see if anyone has tampered with the gun.

My name is Priam Murphy. I am a member of the university ground staff. The sheep blink at me, their eyes

full of dark reproach. As if I were the one who insisted on all this! As if I myself might raise the knife above them!

Yet they are right, I am culpable, I accept things as they are. My aunt does not. She says that I am her beautiful boy but I am one of those songs in which the melody gives advice to the words. I sing the song of circumstance, I do as the tune tells me.

Here is a true story which my aunt told me.

Not so long ago, a seventeen-year-old, Marcus Serjeant, was sent to prison for five years for firing a gun with intent to alarm the Queen. On Saturday 13 June 1981 the Queen was riding down the Mall for the annual ceremony of Trooping the Colour. Six pistol shots rang out. The Queen was courage itself; she kept control of her horse Burmese, which almost bolted.

Serjeant's gun contained blanks, and he was quickly subdued by angry members of the public. For a while his life was in considerable danger.

Serjeant had written to the Queen, warning her to stay at home on 13 June. 'There is an assassin out to get you.'

He described himself clearly. But no one saw him coming.

My great-grandfather, the first Priam Murphy, came to Dunedin from Melbourne in 1877. Like most others he was too late for the gold, but he knew a thing or two about seeds and plants, so hired himself out as a gardener and set up in business in a quiet way importing seeds and plants from England. By the mid-1880s he had his own retail outlet in George Street and a fairly large nursery in North East Valley. There are four bungalows on the old nursery site now. I live in one of them with my aunt. It is

my house. I have taken her in. In some ways, I suppose, she has taken me in.

Remember Tangiwai, my aunt says.

It wasn't long before Priam Murphy had become an informal consultant to the city fathers, and one of the prime movers in the newly founded Amenities Society. It was the Amenities Society which successfully campaigned to have Dunedin's public reserves planted and properly tended. Many felt that the Octagon especially had become a mark of reproach, a blotch on a city whose whole originating impulse had been a vision of moral beauty. My great-grandfather worked in closely with the local councillors. It was he who decided on the Oriental plane trees for the Octagon, and the trees themselves—like those in Queens Gardens and the Museum Reserve—came through the North East Valley nursery. When the council brought David Tannock out from Kew Gardens as Superintendent of Parks and Reserves, Priam Murphy felt he had done his work. He watched from a distance as Tannock created the Botanical Gardens. He never voiced disapproval but there was something pointed about the speed with which he offered his services to the university, supervising two full-time groundsmen for only a small honorarium.

My great-grandfather was a man of ideas before he was a man of substance. It was he who dreamed up the first large shipment of hedgehogs in 1885. His scheme was mocked in the newspaper, but he was convinced the hedgehog would quickly adapt and come to control a wide range of garden pests. Time has proved him right. My aunt says that if she could have sixpence for every hedgehog in Dunedin, she would have enough money to move to Auckland.

My aunt is a frail, nondescript woman. In the street

you would probably fail to notice her coming towards you. She has no more substance than a reflection in the window of Arthur Barnetts—a thin grey figure flitting through the new display of winter coats.

She loves jigsaws. She has just finished ‘The Death of Captain Cook’ and is making a start on a new one. At the moment she is sitting quite still, gazing at the image on the box. A tiny, two-masted ship is perched on the horizon near the middle of the painting. It is caught between a furious blue ocean and a sky of wild, unsteady grey. The ship seems the least important thing on view, though it attracts the eye.

The painter has called his picture ‘The Days of Sail’. There are 1,800 pieces.

The Queen visits Dunedin from time to time, although not as often as many citizens would like. In 1954 Leonard Wright got a knighthood out of it. But she made no sign of coming here on her latest New Zealand trip—something which many locals took as a personal slight, while others saw in it confirmation of the city’s slow decline. The Queen preferred a swamp near Wellington. She stood on her wooden platform and saw, instead of swamp-birds, the white helmets of crouching policemen.

But the Queen was in Dunedin on the afternoon of 14 October 1981, just a few months after the episode with Marcus Serjeant. Mid-October is a difficult time of year in Dunedin. Too late, certainly, for the rhododendrons at the Botanical Gardens, but a little early for the azaleas. Hence the decision to visit the Science Fair at the museum in Great King Street, just across the road from the Sheep-Dip.



My aunt is my mother's sister. Both girls were born in Auckland and came down here to study medicine. My mother fell in love with one of the university gardeners and for her that was the end of that. My aunt found she could not bear the separation from her sister, so came and lived with us, helping my mother keep house. I have a photograph of the family at St Clair. I am holding my aunt's hand. We are standing beside my mother who is buried up to her neck in the sand. We look pleased with ourselves, as if between us we have just invented the whole idea of a day at the beach. My father must have taken the photograph since he is nowhere to be seen.

My aunt does her jigsaws and likes the occasional sherry.

On becoming soldiers, she says, we do not cease to be citizens.

She sorts the pieces of her new jigsaw puzzle into two separate piles: one of cloud, one of water.

My aunt calls me her beautiful boy but I am nearly fifty. I have a ginger beard, a barrel chest and am already quite bald. I do as the tune tells me, though I am far from musical. People tell me I look like a pirate. But I do not have a parrot on my shoulder.

I am an employee of the University of Otago, a minor member of the ground staff. Both my father and my grandfather were Head Gardener, a position first created after the death of Priam Murphy. But I have not risen to such heights. I know nothing of plants and trees. I can tell a pine tree from a rose bush, but finer discriminations are beyond me. Through me the university maintains a family tradition; it also shows sympathy in the matter of my father's death.

I do very ordinary jobs. I mow the lawns below the Clock Tower. I move compost to and fro in a wheelbarrow

and throw weeds on the incinerator. Each day I go to the seventh floor of the Sheep-Dip. The half-dozen sheep, crossbred ewes and wethers, stare at me with dark, reproachful eyes. They think I am going to choose one of them for surgery. But it is tomorrow that Princess Anne will have her hysterectomy. It is tomorrow that Lord Snowdon will receive the kidney which was yesterday removed from Princess Michael.

It is not my job to get the country's medical students off to a good start in the world of surgery. That is not how I think of myself. No, I am here to pulp the swede turnip and remove the sheep droppings. I am here to worry about the gun, to wonder what it is for, and why no one else has seen it.

14 OCTOBER 1981

The Queen and Prince Philip have flown to Dunedin. They drop out of the sky on a lightning visit. Within half an hour of their noon arrival they are in the midst of one of their habitual walkabouts, strolling informally in the Octagon, chatting to the Mayor about the agreeable spring weather, and admiring the plane trees which are just coming into leaf.

It is a time of special offerings. The Queen accepts posies and bouquets as they come to her, until her arms are full of flowers. One lady displays a tea-towel with a border of tiny Union Jacks. Another shows the Queen a large photograph of the Royal Family in July 1947, taken at the time of the Queen's engagement to Prince Philip. A small girl shows a picture of her kitten.

But there are discordant notes. Toward the end of the walkabout there are representatives of the usual protest groups. Maori radicals. IRA sympathisers. Republicans.

The unemployed. Lesbians. There are placards and banners. 'The Empire Is Dead'. 'Go Home Irihapeti'. Some of the demonstrators are chanting: 'Jobs not tours! Jobs not tours!' Loyal onlookers set up a rival cry: 'We love the Queen! We love the Queen!'

But the Queen does not hear. She has already been whisked off to lunch at the Southern Cross Hotel.

I have a cutting from the next morning's *Otago Daily Times*, which shows my aunt holding a photograph up before the Queen. The caption underneath reads *Yes, that's me!* The Queen is pointing and smiling, her arms are full of flowers.

I asked my aunt about this quite recently, and she said she felt she had to be absolutely sure.

CHRISTMAS EVE 1953. 10.21 P.M.

The Wellington-Auckland express plunges through a bridge into the suddenly swollen Whangaehu River, about a mile north of Tangiwai. There are 285 passengers aboard the train but only 134 survive.

My mother and father were planning to visit my mother's parents in Auckland. They had packed Christmas presents. They also hoped they might see the Queen there. They said they would tell her to look out for me when she got to Dunedin. They thought this was a great joke.

It is not clear why they set off to the North Island without taking me. I was fourteen. It was Christmas, a special time of year. Perhaps I didn't want to go. My aunt says that my mother said on the station platform that she needed a little fillip and my father said Elizabeth already had him.

It was confusing at the time and that is how it goes on.

Everything runs together, caught up in the unimaginable mass of water which bore off bridge and carriages and stripped many victims of their clothes and shoes.

My parents left me a bicycle for Christmas. My mother's body was returned to Dunedin for burial. I never saw her. My father was never found. His was one of twenty bodies which were never accounted for. My aunt says he was probably swept out to sea. Even the train's carriages ended up several miles downstream. Shoes were being washed up on the beaches around Wanganui throughout 1954.

I ran up the stairs of the Sheep-Dip. I was probably too late, but all the same I ran.

The sheep were huddled in a corner, a chorus of worried bleats proceeding from expressionless faces. Beneath the window Princess Margaret lay unmoving on the straw. Her skull had been crushed, blood leaked from it.

I knelt beside her. All I could guess was a heavy blow. A heavy blow all right. But where was the gun?

The Queen's car draws up outside the Otago Museum. The civic luncheon at the Southern Cross has gone off rather well. Now it is time to inspect the New Zealand Science Fair with its experimental exhibits showing research and technical skills in the fields of biological and physical sciences, and applied science and technology. Now it is time for the Queen to walk beneath trees planted by my great-grandfather a hundred years ago.

Suddenly there is a loud report—like a firecracker, or a rifle shot. The Queen's police officer, Commander Trestrail, looks worried. Men around the royal car begin to reach into their inside jacket pockets.

But there is no need to panic. The Queen has heard

nothing. It may only have been a metal traffic sign being knocked over. It may only have been a vehicle backfiring. The Queen steps from her car onto the footpath.

And the museum visit goes ahead without delay. The Queen is particularly tickled by a device entitled ‘Mouse Power’, showing mice running almost perpetually on a wheel to produce energy. On a more serious note, the Duke learns that the regional science fairs—there are now thirteen of them—usually involve as many as 5,000 exhibitors, young and old, every year.

In all it is a brief but highly successful visit. Perhaps the only discordant note comes from the Queen’s outfit. The pale blue coat and hat she wears in Dunedin have already been seen before. During a visit to the Elphin Showground in the City Park at Launceston, Tasmania, only eight days earlier, she wore exactly the same outfit.

My aunt has filled the sky with cloud. Now she is deciding on the first pieces of blue.

One of the sheep butted me, she says. Just as I was taking aim. I ended up pulling the trigger far too soon. I just swung around and hit it in the head. It wasn’t part of any grand design.

You had better give me the gun, I say. We’ll have to get rid of it.

What gun? says my aunt. You’re a dear boy, Priam, but I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.

I explain to the others in the creative writing workshop that my great-grandfather simply pushed his way into the story.

‘I didn’t mean him to play much part at all. He just got bigger and bigger.’

‘I wonder if you could use him somewhere else,’ says

Tom. 'See, perhaps you've really got several stories here.'

Jane says that, as a character, she likes the great-grandfather more than the aunt.

'Are they both true, or did you make them up?'

I explain that my great-grandfather is based on historical fact but that the aunt is pretty much my own invention.

'I thought so,' says Jane.

'You meet people like that, though,' says Allen. 'She's not unlike any number of aunts really.'

'What about this Sheep-Dip idea?' says Tom. 'I had friends at Med School and I've never heard that name. Not that I want to make realism a test of everything.'

'Oh it is,' says Sally. 'Is the name for the building I mean. I thought you read it out beautifully.'

'I made up the names for the sheep,' I say. 'They just came to me as a sort of silly idea.'

'Well it's really very striking for a first attempt,' says Fiona. 'I think you have every right to feel encouraged, Tony. The first section's almost a story in itself. That's where the most accomplished writing is.'

'My point exactly,' says Tom. 'It's really more than one story.' 'Well,' says Fiona. 'I think the main thing is that you do something with it. Send it off somewhere.'

My name is Anthony Priam Murphy. I mow the lawns below the Clock Tower and look after the university sheep. My aunt and I live together in a house in North East Valley. In the evenings she works at her jigsaw puzzles, while I puzzle over my short stories.

My aunt says I am her beautiful boy but that I am like the hedgehog who curls up in the middle of the road when traffic is approaching. She talks to me about my poor emotional posture. She puts a book on her head

and walks up and down in my bedroom to show what she means.

She tucks me up and turns out the light. She says, 'Sweet dreams.'

But she does not believe in dreams.

In our creative writing workshop we have started keeping dream notebooks. We keep an exercise book by the bed; and when we wake, we write down everything we can remember. Then we try to make something out of it.

In tonight's dream my father and grandfather and great-grandfather are standing on the deck of a ship which has just docked at Port Chalmers. They look down towards me but they do not move towards the gangplank.

They know they are too late for the gold.

'Come ashore!' I call to them. 'Come ashore!'

They make no response. But surely they can hear me . . .

I begin to sing a song of welcome. The melody is beautiful. I do not understand the words but know that they are part of the beauty.

All the time that I am singing I stand absolutely still. My great-grandfather, the first Priam Murphy, dissolves. Of course. My grandfather dissolves, too.

My father hesitates, then moves towards the gangway . . .

This is a dream. At any moment I may wake. Clouds pour across the sky and my lungs fill with air as though they might be sails.

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