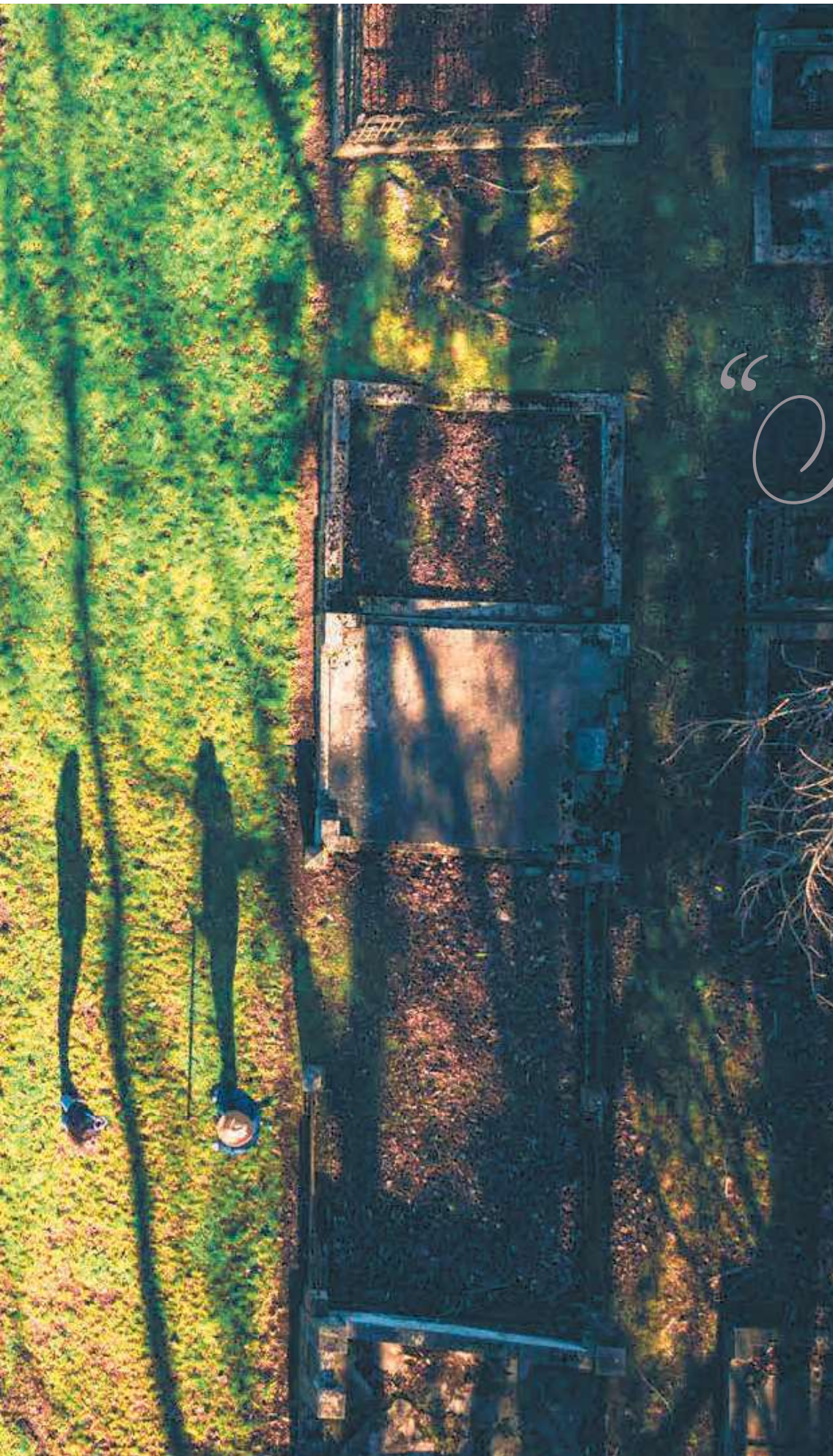


After lives

Taphophile Gregor Campbell unearths and shares fascinating stories of the lives of people buried in Dunedin's historic cemeteries

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“Some people think cemeteries

are spooky places, but I look at them as libraries,” says Gregor Campbell. “Every grave has a story – you just have to find it.”

It’s that sentiment that led the self-confessed taphophile, or lover of cemeteries, to create a blog five years ago about the lives and deaths of the people buried in Dunedin’s Southern and Northern Cemeteries and, more recently, Anderson Bay Cemetery.

The blog provided a springboard for the cemetery tours he now conducts, initially for interested friends, then for last November’s Ōtepoti Dunedin Heritage Festival (he’s an active committee member of the Southern Heritage Trust).

So far, most people on the tours are from Dunedin – some even have a family connection, which Gregor particularly enjoys – but, with a marketing manager now on board, he’s focusing on growing his audience.

Born in Dunedin to a family of campers and trampers, Gregor says history has always been part of his life. He spent years exploring and photographing Otago’s abandoned buildings, and prior to the Covid-19 pandemic he ran other tours in Dunedin, including at Larnach Castle and an inner-city walking tour – something he hopes to restart soon.

It’s a typically fresh but sunny Dunedin day when *Heritage New Zealand* magazine joins Gregor on a tour of the leafy Southern Cemetery, a Category 1 historic place.

He's chosen this spot not only because it contains the graves of most of Otago's early European settlers, but also because it's the location of the Dewar family, whose tombstone first piqued his insatiable curiosity about those buried here.

Gregor strides off down a winding path to find it, ice axe in hand (inherited from his father, it adds character, he says, but is also handy for pointing things out, and occasionally for climbing up steep banks), before stopping in front of the stone. It's unremarkable save for four faint, barely legible words: "... who were brutally murdered". It's a shocking epitaph.

"... they still loved, hated and had dreams, just like us. They lived, they died and now they're here – and their stories should be told"



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“I went home and tried to find the story behind the stone,” recalls Gregor, “and that’s how I found Papers Past [paperspast.natlib.govt.nz], which is an invaluable resource. It’s there I discovered the life and career of a Victorian psychopath.”

That psychopath was Robert Butler, a burglar from Melbourne who immigrated to New Zealand and graduated to murder in 1880 when he killed James and Elizabeth Dewar and their young daughter at their house in Cumberland Street; probably, Gregor suspects from his research, over some jewellery Elizabeth had in her possession. Butler defended himself and was acquitted, although he was hanged 25 years later for another killing in Brisbane. (“Apparently they hanged him too far and nearly tore his head off,” says Gregor.)

Heading to our next stop, we navigate some toppled gravestones. The oldest of Dunedin’s three main cemeteries, the Southern Cemetery was established in 1858 and closed to new burials in 1974 (unless in possession of a family plot), and much of it is in an atmospheric state of decay.

Many of Otago’s early leaders are among the estimated 23,600 people interred here. The graves

of Otago founder Captain William Cargill, the colony’s first spiritual leader (and poet Robert Burns’ nephew) the Revd Thomas Burns, Hallenstein Brothers founder Bendix Hallenstein, and David Theomin, who established the Dresden Piano Company and later had Olveston House built, are all part of the Southern Cemetery tour.

It’s not just the city’s elite who stand out though; the cemetery – which is split into Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Jewish and Chinese sections – is significant for representing a cross-section of Victorian society, including teachers and doctors, and members of the military and the working classes. It also contains unmarked graves of Taranaki Māori prisoners of war, making the cemetery of cultural and spiritual significance to Māori.

Gregor points out the grave of the Wilson family, who died in 1879 in a fire at Ross’s building in the Octagon – now the site of the Regent Theatre – before pausing by a simple plot covered in leaves.

“This is Catherine Jarvey,” he notes. Catherine’s story is a sad one: originally from Ireland, she was murdered by her husband, Captain Andrew Jarvey,



Hear more from
Gregor Campbell:
[youtube.com/
HeritageNewZealand](https://youtube.com/HeritageNewZealand)
PouhereTaonga



- 1 Taphophile Gregor Campbell loves discovering the stories behind the stones.
- 2 Gregor stands in front of two dramatic headstones marking the graves of friends who drowned.



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who had bigamously married another woman. Jarvey's 18-year-old daughter Elizabeth witnessed her mother's painful death from strychnine poisoning and testified against her father in court. The jury found Jarvey guilty, and in 1865 he was the first man to be hanged in the South Island.

"Elizabeth is one of my heroes because she was so brave," says Gregor. "I would love to know what happened to her." As he says this, Gregor's passion for his work – and the people he researches – is clear; he obviously gets immense pleasure from sharing their stories.

Sarah Gallagher, Heritage Assessment Advisor in the Dunedin office of Heritage New Zealand Pouhere

Taonga, agrees. "I've been on one of Gregor's tours, which was entertaining and informative. He is infinitely curious and dedicated to exploring historic sites and is a wonderful writer who teases out stories from the gravestones."

The 90-minute tour certainly covers a lot of ground – in more ways than one. As we crisscross the moss-covered cemetery, it's like walking back through Otago's historical timeline, with graves marking key events in the region's past: the tuberculosis epidemic; the Battle of Passchendaele (only one memorial here bears the date 12 October 1917, the catastrophic day when more than 800 New Zealanders died in Belgium's Flanders Fields, but there are many more in cemeteries throughout Otago); and the Otago gold rush of the 1860s – some Chinese miners are still buried here, but some were exhumed and put on board the *SS Ventnor* to return to China before the ship sank near Hokianga Harbour in 1902.

We hear other personal tales of suffering, heroism and love – the dead coming to life in the little details that Gregor's research has uncovered. There's John Bevan, who, after surviving the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854, returned to New Zealand to join the police and came to be respected by the criminal classes for his refusal to trump up charges.

THE POLISH PRINCES

The Southern Cemetery is the resting place of not one but two Polish princes – Alois Konstantin Lubecki and his eldest son Jean, who inherited his father’s title when he died in 1864, then died himself just a year later.

The princes were descendants of the famous Viking Rurik of Ladoga. Alois was forced to flee his home country after he joined the rebels fighting for an independent Poland during the ultimately unsuccessful November Uprising of 1830.

He moved to England and married Laura Duffus, then in 1838 the couple travelled to Australia, where they lived for 25 years and had two sons and two daughters.

Eventually, the family of six sailed to Dunedin in 1863, settling in a house on the corner of George and Union Streets.

After the deaths of his father and brother, Alois’s younger son, Alois Junior, inherited the title of Prince. He also became Dunedin’s postmaster in 1865 – a role he held for 30 years – and was instrumental in arranging New Zealand’s first telephone call, between Dunedin and Milton, on 2 February 1878. The call was ordered by the General Manager of the Telegraph Department, Charles Lemon, leading to Dunedin’s telephone poles subsequently being dubbed ‘lemon trees’. Alois Junior died in 1926; he never married, so the male line of the Lubecki family died with him. ■

Or Alexandra Mathieson, who became a gifted surgeon – a remarkable feat for a woman in the early 1900s – and died aged 28 at Gore Hospital after a terrible accident with carbolic acid.

And Marion White, a psychologist and promising writer who poisoned herself with strychnine in 1897 because she felt trapped by her gender.

Towards the end of the tour, we stop in the cemetery’s Jewish section to examine the grave of Samuel Saltzman.

“In the 1990s I ran for mayor, as a bit of street theatre, really,” Gregor reveals. “A woman came up to me in the Octagon and said, ‘If you promise to have a statue of Samuel Saltzman put up, then you’ve got my vote’. So I promised – and then went to find out who he was.”

Saltzman started out as a tailor’s apprentice in Warsaw, Poland, before moving with a friend to London and then the US, where he specialised in ladies’ tailoring. He later immigrated to Dunedin, where he prospered and wrote cheques for worthy causes, including the construction of the St John Ambulance headquarters in York Place, and tuberculosis blocks at various hospitals. “He gave his money away,” says Gregor. “He was a hero.”

Incidentally, the friend Samuel travelled with to the US – Schmucl Gelbfisz – changed his name to Samuel Goldfish and then Goldwyn.



- 1 The steep slopes of the Southern Cemetery overlook Otago Harbour.
- 2 The Chinese section contains graves of miners who died during the Otago gold rush.
- 3 A flower brightens up one moss-covered grave.
- 4 Gregor’s tours are rich in little details that bring the dead to life.
- 5 Much of the cemetery is in an atmospheric state of decay.
- 6 The grave of Otago founder Captain William Cargill.

“As in ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’” says Gregor. “It took me a while to confirm it, but the friend Saltzman travelled to London with became filmmaker Samuel Goldwyn, the Hollywood millionaire.”

As that revelation sinks in, Gregor reflects on what he hopes people take away from his tours.

“I hope they come to understand that while the people who make up our history lived very different lives from ours today, they still loved, hated and had dreams, just like us. They lived, they died and now they’re here – and their stories should be told.” ■

To find out more about Gregor and his tours, visit darkestunedin.co.nz