

An Ornament to Our Town

Sarah Brown

When it was first opened, Dannevirke's former public library was described as "a credit to Mr Carnegie and an ornament to our town".

Below: The Carnegie Library, top: soon after it was built and bottom: today. (Top photo: Dannevirke Library; bottom photo: Anthony Aldridge)

The early European settlers of New Zealand "brought with them not only sheep and wheat, ploughs and axes, but also books". Indeed books were of such importance to the pioneers that printing presses and books were early introduced by missionaries.



As settlements grew and became villages, towns and cities, a need for libraries arose. The first of these were in Mechanics' Institutes. Then the 1869 Public Libraries Act empowered local authorities to set up libraries to which admission was to be free; it allowed a rate to be levied for the purpose, but it was not to exceed one penny in the pound.

In the early part of this century there was a considerable change in the direction of librarianship and libraries. Much of this, in the English speaking world, was due to the influence of one man — Andrew Carnegie. Born in Scotland in 1835, he emigrated to the United States with his family in 1848. There, he made his fortune manufacturing steel. He sold his company in 1901 for \$US480 million. Meanwhile, between 1886 and 1917, he undertook a programme of funding libraries. Of the 2,507 he helped throughout the world, 828 were in countries other than the United States. The underlying principle of his philanthropy was that "the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves: to provide part of the means by which those who desire to improve may do so; to give those who desire to rise, the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all." In brief, if a town's population was large enough, its annual appropriation high enough and its existing library facilities poor enough, it had a good chance of securing a Carnegie library grant.

Carnegie's influence on libraries throughout the English speaking world was renowned for its scale and its effect on design. Traditionally libraries had been hallowed places of learning where mere mortals feared to tread. Such libraries often reflected the paternalistic attitudes of their benefactors and architects of the day were usually interested in continuing this tradition, while librarians were concerned with designs which "supported efficiency in library administration". Andrew Carnegie proposed libraries which brought "readers and books together, rather than keeping them apart".

In 1898 a group of Dannevirke businessmen set up a public library in their town. Purpose built, it also had rooms for reading, playing chess and draughts, and two rooms for the librarian's residence. In 1902 the Borough Council took

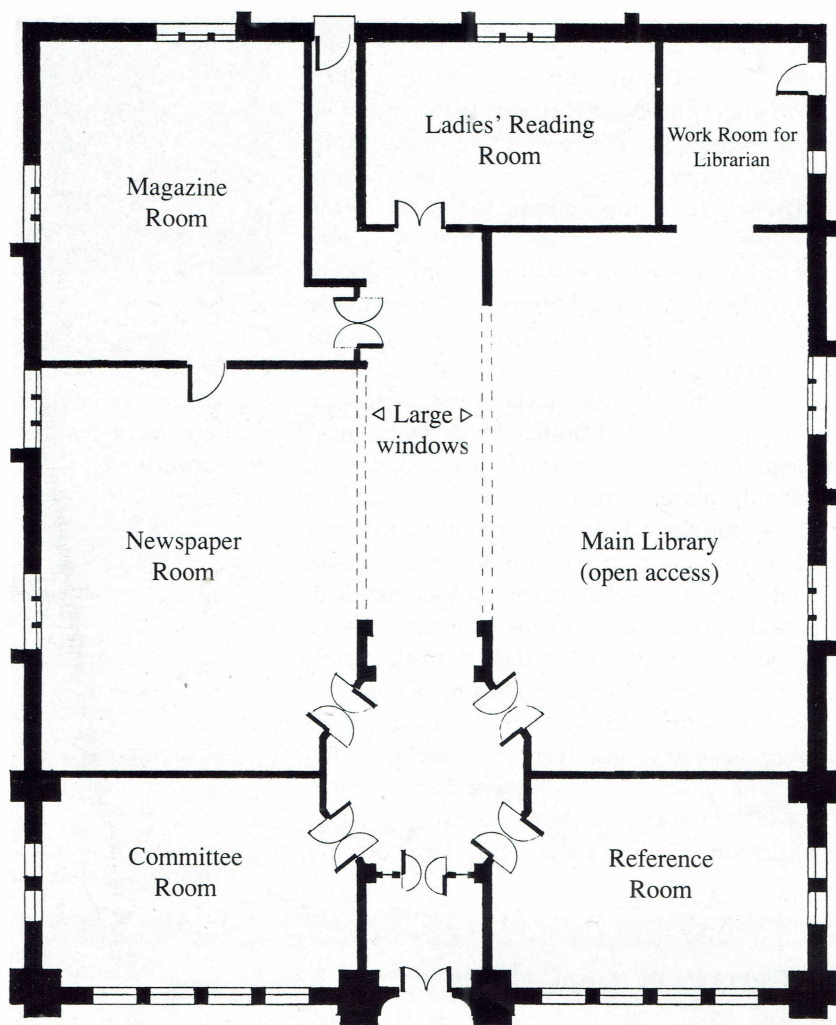
over its administration and levied a library rate. But, by 1906, the annual membership fee, which entitled a subscriber to take out one book at a time, had risen to ten shillings. Meanwhile the library building was already considered to be too small, so the Dannevirke Borough Council, hearing that its counterpart in Westport has obtained a Carnegie library grant, decided to apply for one too. In 1905 it wrote to Carnegie's secretary, James Bertram, who, in response, sent a questionnaire which asked for information on the town's population, the existing library, the number of books held and the previous year's circulation. Details of how the library was housed, the number and size of the rooms and their uses, and the state of its finances, including a breakdown of its receipts and expenditures, were also required. Finally it asked what the Council would pledge for annual maintenance should a grant be received, whether a site was available and how much money had been collected to put towards the new building. On receipt of the completed questionnaire, Bertram wrote that Andrew Carnegie was pleased to grant £2,000 to Dannevirke, providing that the Public Library Act was adhered to.

The new building, designed by S.D. Lamb and built by J.L. Scott, was opened on 27 May 1908. Constructed of brick with plaster ornamentation, the building's main door opened into a vestibule, from which a wide passage with glass windows ran the length of the building. This led to the main library, a committee room, a reference room (initially used as a reading room), a ladies' reading room, a magazine room, a newspaper room and a workroom for the librarian. The Dannevirke design is characteristic of New Zealand library design in the early twentieth century. In the United States, by contrast, most Carnegie libraries had a single open room with a centrally placed issues-desk and two reading areas — one for adults and the other for children. As the risk of fire was a major concern in those days, a stamped steel ceiling was installed. This and various other embellishments, meant total expenditure exceeded the Carnegie grant, but a request for a further £500 was denied.

The *Dannevirke Advocate*, in its report of the opening ceremony, described the exterior as follows: "The main feature of the exterior design of the library is the entrance doorway, which is flanked on either side with two double



Dannevirke's former Public Library building, which is now used by community groups. (Photo: Anthony Aldridge)



Reconstructed plan of the library with room uses as described on opening day, 27 May 1908. (Plan drawn by Abigail Van Slyck and Mitchell Favreau)

Corinthian columns, having fluted shafts and well modelled foliated capitals, and the whole being surmounted with an enriched pediment.”

At that opening ceremony Dannevirke's Mayor, Pastor H.M. Ries, described the events which had led up to it. He concluded by saying, “You now possess a library, a free public library, a credit to Mr Andrew Carnegie, and a most useful institution and an ornament to our town”. At the conclusion of the Mayor's speech, Mrs Ries turned the key in the door and as a memento of the occasion, Mr Scott, the builder, presented Mrs Ries with a gold key, which Mrs Ries' grand-daughter still owns.

At the time, the library had around 2,500 books on its shelves, in addition to magazines and newspapers. The Library Committee wrote to Carnegie thanking him and requesting a photograph of him to hang in the library.

In the early 1920s there was a flurry of correspondence between the Dannevirke Town Clerk, Mr C. Mears, and the Carnegie Foundation Secretary, James Bertram. The latter wrote to say that the Hastings Borough Council had requested permission to charge for books borrowed, citing Dannevirke as a precedent. In reply, Mr Mears referred to the Library Act, the adherence to which had been cited as a condition for the original grant. It allowed for charging. Subscriptions remained in place until 1946 when a change was made to the government sponsored “Country Library Service”. That year there were 1,093 borrowers from the Dannevirke Library; this had risen to 2,660 by 1952. Alterations were made to the building over the years: the two large interior windows were removed to make the library open plan and at some time buttresses were added to strengthen the building.

By the 1980s it was obvious that the building was no longer suitable as a library. It was cold in winter and leaked. The windows, which were nearly two metres above floor level to allow for shelving under them, let in too much sunlight in some areas and not enough in others. In spite of the centrally placed issues-desk, security was hard to monitor; the work area was cramped and the building always seemed to be dusty. In 1984 a new complex was built and Dannevirke's Carnegie building is now used as a Community Centre and houses a Kura Kaupapa Maori. Of the eighteen original Carnegie library buildings in New Zealand, twelve still stand, but only three remain in use as libraries. □

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Author's note: I have drawn heavily on the work of Dr Abigail Van Slyck, Assistant Professor of Architecture, University of Arizona, and would like to thank her for material supplied and for her infectious enthusiasm for the topic. Dr Van Slyck is working on a comprehensive social and architectural history of New Zealand's Carnegie libraries, with support of a grant from the Fulbright Scholar Programme. I would also like to thank former Dannevirke Librarian, Mrs Gabriel Taylor (grand-daughter of H.M. Reis) and former Library Assistant, Marie Charmley.