

Remembering the sacrifices of those with SC connections who served their country 100 years ago.

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Denis CLARKE No.6/3657

Denis Clarke was the son of late Mr James Clarke, late of Hokitika, and of Mrs Margaret Clarke, living in Auckland and later in Hastings. He was born on 31 May 1876 at Waimea, Westland. Denis was educated at St Mary's Roman Catholic Boys' School, Hokitika.

In October 1887 his father, James Clarke died. Mr Clarke was one of the pioneers of the West Coast and identified with the advancement of Westland from its earliest days. He was a native of County Donegal, Ireland, and had gone to the Victorian goldfields before moving to Otago and then the West Coast where he engaged in carting and carrying the mail. After her husband's death, Margaret Clarke and family moved from Hokitika to Westport.

In November 1900, Denis, a pupil of the Sisters of Mercy at Hokitika, was successful in the Trinity College senior pianoforte examination, which he passed with honours. In June 1901 he became the conductor of the newly formed church choir at Hokitika. In addition he played the organ. Mr D. Clarke played a significant part in the celebrations on 29 December 1903 to mark the silver jubilee of the founding of St Columbkille's Convent at Hokitika. The choir under his leadership sang Turner's Mass. Later in the day he was one of the accompanists for the concert items. And in March 1904 he was again to the fore at the St Patrick's night concert – encored for his song "The Irish emigrant", and again providing accompaniments.

By 1905 Denis was residing at Fairlie where he was a teacher of music. He immersed himself in local life and in teaching and sharing music, again frequently providing musical items and accompaniments and guiding students through their examinations. It was at Fairlie in November 1905 that he obtained his teacher's diploma. Two years later he was one of the most successful Catholic music teachers in the district, four of his pupils gaining senior honours.

Denis was also a golf player, being a member of the Fairlie Club and serving on the committee. Just a few weeks later, at the Fairlie Orchestra and Dramatic Society concert, he gave vocal solos and led operatic choruses by the Operatic and Glee Club. In October 1913 the members of the Glee Company presented their leader, Mr D. Clarke, with a small token of their appreciation of his services.

At the beginning of August 1914, Mr Denis Clarke secured rooms in the Herald Buildings, Arcade, Timaru, enabling him to offer his services as a teacher of singing and pianoforte to the people of Timaru. He proudly gave notice that his ex-pupils were scattered over the whole world and that many had gained distinction. At the same time he retained his Fairlie connection, visiting there on two days a week. In Timaru, his students continued to succeed in examinations.

Early in 1915 Mr Clarke accepted the position of conductor of the choir of the Sacred Heart Church, Timaru, having previously conducted the Catholic church choir at Fairlie. But, a few months afterwards he was accepted for active service with the Canterbury Battalion. Maybe his last local performance was at the Fairlie Orchestral Society's concert on 23 September 1915, where he was "in capital voice" and deserved his encore. On 18 October 1915 he was part of South Canterbury's quota which headed for Trentham, but only after playing the piano at a farewell for a Fairlie soldier. He departed on the "Maunganui" on 8 January 1916, destined for Suez. He embarked for France just two months before his death.

Denis Clarke died of wounds received in action on 17 September 1916, wounds which penetrated the abdomen, in the first battle of the Somme. In a letter received by a relative shortly after his death, Private Clarke wrote of the impending entrance of his battalion into the second stage of the big push, which he said he did not expect to survive. He was buried in Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension, Somme, France.

Private Clarke left no will. His plaque and scroll were sent to his mother. Denis was one of six sons of Margaret Clarke, only two of whom were living at her death in 1923 – Con and Patrick. Those known were John Patrick, Cornelius Joseph (Con), Patrick Joseph and Denis. John died in 1903, aged 34 years. His brother P. J. Clark was with the hospital ship Maheno in charge of the telegraph department (1916); he died in 1935. And an older brother, Cornelius Joseph Clarke, enlisted with the Australian Forces in August 1916 in New South Wales, only to be discharged in January 1917 as medically unfit. He was a solicitor in New South Wales for many years, and died there in 1940.

Private Denis Clarke was buried in the Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension, Somme, France. His name is inscribed on the Timaru War Memorial, the Fairlie War memorial, and on the Hokitika War Memorial.

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