



Robert Arthur Lawson (baptised Robert) was born on 1 January 1833 at Grange, in the parish of Abdie, Fife, Scotland. He was the fourth child of James Lawson, a carpenter, and his wife, Margaret Arthur. Educated at the parish school, he commenced his architectural training in Perth around 1848, and completed it in Edinburgh in the early 1850s with James Gillespie Graham, who was closely associated with the Gothic Revival architect Augustus Pugin.

Attracted, no doubt, by the prospect of greater opportunities in the gold-rich colony of Victoria, Lawson emigrated on the *Tongataboo*, arriving at Port Phillip Bay on 1 November 1854. He spent the next seven years in various occupations: goldmining in Ballarat, as correspondent for Melbourne and Geelong newspapers, and as an architect. In 1857 he designed the Free Church school and the following year a Catholic school, both in Steiglitz near Geelong. By 1861 he was practising architecture in Melbourne. The following year, under the pseudonym 'Presbyter', he won a competition for the design of First Church of Otago, in Dunedin, New Zealand. He set up in practice in Dunedin in June 1862.

Lawson received a steady flow of commissions for ecclesiastical, commercial, public and domestic buildings. His designs demonstrate his versatility in a wide range of styles. Many of the works have been either mutilated or – like the Otago Benevolent Institution, the Hanover Street Baptist Church and the architect's own house – demolished. The former South District School in William Street (1864) and Brooklands farmhouse at Goodwood (1867), with their

Scottish vernacular crow-stepped gables, survive, as do the former Post Office at Lawrence, the Star and Garter Hotel in Oamaru, and most of the churches.

Lawson was pre-eminently a church architect, designing and superintending the construction of over 40 churches. He was a prominent Presbyterian (an elder and session clerk at First Church and superintendent of the Sunday school), and it is likely that many of the churches and manses for that denomination in Otago were built to his designs. Early examples include St Andrew's Presbyterian Church (later Word of Life Church) and Trinity Wesleyan Church (later the Fortune Theatre) in Dunedin (both 1869), and his most admired building, First Church, completed to a substantially revised design in 1873.

Most of Lawson's churches are Gothic in style and Puginian in character, except that long chancels have been dispensed with as superfluous to the requirements of Presbyterian worship. Vestigial stumps of chancels and transepts often remain, however, as in the East Taieri Presbyterian Church (1870), Knox Church, Dunedin (1874–76), Tokomairiro Presbyterian Church, Milton (opened 1889), and the Lawrence church (1886), to indicate a notional cruciform plan. Of Lawson's timber churches, those at Kakanui (1870) and East Gore (1881) survive.

Lawson's commercial buildings included banks, offices, shops and warehouses. The Bank of Otago (1870, later the National Bank of New Zealand) and Bank of New South Wales (1884, later the Forrester Gallery), both in Oamaru, and the Union Bank of Australasia (1874, later the ANZ Bank) in Dunedin, are particularly handsome specimens: each is an Italian Renaissance *palazzo*, fronted by a columned Greek portico. Few of the office buildings and warehouses erected to Lawson's designs in Dunedin remain. Arthur Briscoe and Company's warehouse (1872) and the Royal Exchange Hotel (1878–79), a lavish essay in Renaissance classicism, are particularly serious losses.

His connections with the business community brought Lawson several commissions for large residences. The most famous of these is 'The Camp' (Larnach Castle) on the Otago Peninsula, built for William Larnach. An imposing, upright, stone-built structure, the centre of the principal face is dominated by an entrance tower of four stages with a steep flight of steps leading to the front door on the first floor. The two lower floors are fronted by a spacious, u-shaped, double-storeyed cast-iron veranda. While impressive, the building is nevertheless clumsy and eccentric. In 1880 Larnach also commissioned Lawson to erect in Dunedin's Northern cemetery a miniaturised version of First Church to serve as a tomb.

Lawson's most significant public buildings were the Dunedin Municipal Chambers (1878–80), Otago Boys' High School (1882–84), and the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum complex (1879–84, now demolished). The competition for the design of the Municipal Chambers was won by Thomas Cameron Bedford, but when Lawson was appointed supervising architect he used his own design. In 1879 he also produced a reduced version of this design in Timaru to serve as the Government Buildings. Earlier works in the town included the Bank of New Zealand (opened 1870) and Trinity Presbyterian Church (1875–76), both now demolished.

At the time of its completion, Seacliff Lunatic Asylum was the largest building in the colony. Unfortunately, structural defects began to appear even before the building was completed. In 1887 a major slip occurred which rendered the northern wing uninhabitable. The following year a commission of inquiry held Lawson responsible, and adjudged him negligent and incompetent. Thus disgraced, in a period of economic recession, he found that business was

far from brisk and moved to Melbourne in 1890 after serving as locum tenens for the Wellington architect William Turnbull.

In Melbourne Lawson joined Frederick William Grey in partnership, and in 1890 they were the architects for Earlesbrae Hall, a splendid Grecian mansion at Essendon, Victoria, and one of the finest works associated with Lawson's name. Lawson's Moran and Cato warehouse in Fitzroy and the College Church, Parkville, both built in 1897, are notable survivors from this period. He also served as an elder of St Kilda Presbyterian Church.

Returning to Dunedin in October 1900, Lawson entered into partnership with his former pupil, James Louis Salmond. The attractive brick residence built for Watson Shennan at 367 High Street was designed at this time. Lawson was elected vice president of the Otago Institute of Architects.

On 3 December 1902 Lawson died suddenly while on a visit to Sutherlands, near Pleasant Point, South Canterbury, and was buried in Dunedin's Northern cemetery. His wife, Jessie Sinclair Hepburn, whom he had married at Dunedin on 15 November 1864, survived him by 21 years. They had three daughters (one died at the age of seven) and a son. Lawson had done more to shape the architectural face of Victorian Dunedin than any other architect.

Jonathan Mane-Wheeki. 'Lawson, Robert Arthur', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 30-Oct-2012

URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/215/lawson-robert-arthur>