

GURR John

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A Headmaster's Suicide: the death of John Gurr, Onehunga, 1886

On the morning of 6 October 1886, a painter named Joseph Tingey who lived in Onehunga went to fish off the Mangere Bridge. He became intrigued by a length of clothesline tied to the bridge's railing and wondered if there was a basket of fish at the other end. He proceeded to haul on the line, but didn't find fish – instead, he ended up retrieving the body of **John Gurr**, headmaster of Onehunga School.

Gurr had tied one end of a clothesline around the railing, and then looped and knotted the other around his waist. He had been wearing his usual attire when he went into the water, and had written a farewell note, given to one of his children, addressed and delivered by the child to the Rev. William Edward Mulgan of St Peter's Church.

Onehunga, October 6, 1886.

Rev. and Dear Sir, -- I can no longer bear the living death. My brain is on fire, and at times I don't know what to do or think. If anything happens to me, please break the news quietly to my children, and help them all you can; also send letter to Mrs. Gurr. I am struggling, but oh, what will the end be? I have been a faithful teacher in the Onehunga school, and may my innocence be laid bare, for the sake of my dear ones.

Good-bye.

From the unfortunate John Gurr.

P.S. Look near the little bridge.

John Gurr worked as a teacher in Canterbury and Featherston before arriving in Auckland in 1885 to take up the position of headmaster at Onehunga school. His name is missed out by Janice Mogford in her book *The Onehunga Heritage*, where only the names of Alexander Grant (1876-1885) and R. D. Stewart (1886-1896) appear, but at the time of his death he was also President of the Auckland Branch of the New Zealand Educational Institute. He had seven children in all, two grown to adulthood and living elsewhere in the country at the time of his death.

Complaints about improper behaviour around female pupils at Onehunga were taken up by the local school committee as charges "of a flagrant character" with the Auckland Board of Education on 24 September 1886. The Board suspended him, pending a full inquiry to be carried out by the committee and a report back to the Board. The brief news report about the matter, in the *NZ Herald* offering no details as to the charges, was republished in the *Evening Post* in Wellington – and one of Gurr's sons living there sent a copy up to his parents in Onehunga. On top of the local community whispers, Gurr now faced apparent nationwide ignominy, and the pressures rose within his mind.

He had tidied up the school, and had undeniable ability as a teacher and disciplinarian, but the school committee felt that it was best that he leave. "This," according to the *Auckland Star*, "was in the face of the fact that the charges on investigation proved to be by no means so serious as at first appeared." Gurr tendered his resignation, but the Education Board refused to accept it, instead simply suspending Gurr and demanding from the committee the full details of the charges. This, the committee declined to

do, stating that they felt the details should not be made public, and that their informants had been promised confidentiality. The Board, however, were adamant – they demanded the details, and also a copy of Gurr’s letter of resignation. The committee responded on 2 October that they would “forward the information asked for in a few days” and advised that Gurr had applied for leave to withdraw his resignation. Initially, he’d said that he wanted to leave to take up other employment. Now, four days before his death, he seemed keen to take matters to court.

The papers at the time, however, described him as lacking “moral courage” to see this sordid affair through. His friends and doctor noticed his decline. Dr. William Robert Erson advised him the day before his death to write to the Board proclaiming his innocence and offered to help him do this. A day before that, his solicitor, William Wasteneys, found him lying on a couch in the dark at Wasteneys’ home, answering in response to Wasteneys’ enquiry as to how he was, “I am as bad as at the worst of times.” A day later, he made out his will with Wasteneys. The next day, Gurr was dead.

His death, at the inquest, was put down to temporary insanity. The Board received a report from the school committee on 8 October, which still maintained that there were charges against Gurr. The Board blamed members of the Press for publishing even the reference of the charges against Gurr, and there was discussion as to whether their meetings in future should be held in private and away from reporters. They maintained the status quo, however, and moved that with regard to the correspondence received relating to John Gurr, that no further action be taken. A Dunedin paper apparently headed up their report of the events as “Death before Dishonour.”

The *New Zealand Tablet* on 15 October 1886 opined (in relation to the still quite-heated debate over religious versus secular education in “godless schools”:

The facts attendant on the suicide of the unfortunate teacher Gurr, at Onehunga, give us another warning concerning the dangers of the godless schools. Either the man was guilty of the disgraceful conduct of which he was accused, although of this there seems to be strong doubts, or else the girls who accused him showed themselves capable of foul and disgusting lying as well as of a good deal more. In either case parents should perceive how considerately the law acts in compelling them to submit their innocent children to polluting influences, whether those of an infamous teacher or those of abandoned schoolmates — the choice between the two being rather a difficult one to make.

We’ll never know for certain exactly what happened at Onehunga school or whether John Gurr had been guilty, or innocent of the charges laid against him.