

IV. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, DOMINION MUSEUM.

Dominion Museum, Wellington, 10th July, 1919.

THE MUSEUM AND THE WAR.

The close of the war ends, it may be hoped, a period of great difficulty for the Museum, and ushers in a new era in which the Museum may expand to fulfil its many natural functions and take a worthy part in the national reconstruction demanded by the times.

Prior to the war the Museum had long outgrown its accommodation, and the provision of a new building to replace the old overcrowded, leaking, decaying wooden building was admitted on all sides as one of the first duties of the Government. The war with its all-important claims on the time, labour, and resources of the nation inevitably postponed the new building, and there is now a danger that the necessity for immediate action may be lost sight of amongst the numerous other activities brought into existence by the close of the war.

A new Museum building is urgently necessary for the following reasons: Firstly, the existing building is not fireproof, and cannot be made fireproof. Collections of priceless value are stored in this building and the store-shed, which is also not fireproof. Mention need only be made of the Lord St. Oswald collection of Polynesian curios brought back by Captain Cook on his voyage of discovery. New Zealand owes a duty not only to herself, but to the whole world, in regard to this and other collections. No commercial corporation would hold such valuables without the best possible insurance, and for the Government the best insurance is a fireproof building.

Secondly, the existing building is badly riddled by boring-beetles, which it is impossible to eradicate. This constitutes a continual danger to the many fine pieces of Maori wood-carvings housed in the building.

Thirdly, the existing building is too small by many times for the collections, which are consequently badly overcrowded. As a result the display of specimens has little educational value, and is inevitably creating amongst youthful visitors and school-teachers the idea that a museum is a heterogeneous collection of curios, whereas under proper conditions it is capable of creating ideas of natural law, order, and beauty, and of supplementing the historical and geographical teachings of school and university. Further, the overcrowding in both Museum and the store-shed hampers the study of the accumulated material and is retarding many branches of scientific research in New Zealand.

"To him that hath shall be given" is a maxim that holds especially true in museum experience. The failure of the Museum to house beyond danger of fire and to display suitably the collections it already possesses inevitably tends to discourage donors of valuable collections. Thus, for instance, the failure of the Government to display suitably the Maori collection donated by the trustees of Sir Walter Buller has prevented the donation of his invaluable bird collection, and it now appears probable that his collection has been lost to New Zealand.

Fourthly, the Museum houses the most valuable scientific library in New Zealand—that of the New Zealand Institute—but the accommodation is utterly inadequate. This library has been offered to the Government to form the nucleus of the Dominion Scientific, Art, and Historical Library contemplated by the Science and Art Act, 1913, but with the proviso that the transfer does not take place until a fireproof building is provided. A reasonably complete scientific and technological library is a preliminary necessity before any notable advance in the application of science to industry can take place. The only obstacle in the way of constituting such a library is the lack of a suitable and fireproof building.

Fifthly, an expansion of the Museum's activities is precluded by the lack of space for working-rooms, storage, and display of specimens. A museum is not a dead or fossil institution, but should move with the times and be in advance of the times. The Dominion Museum could do much for national reconstruction by the display of suitable specimens illustrating scientific agriculture, industrial technology, hygiene and public health, domestic architecture and town-planning, and similar subjects. Not only could much be done in these ways, but it ought to be expected of a museum. Such an expansion of the Museum's functions is utterly impossible without a new building.

Sixthly, the Dominion Museum as a national institution is visited by the majority of travellers to New Zealand. The lack of architectural beauty, the small dimensions, the gloomy lighting of the interior, and the poor quality of the show-cases cannot but make a very unfavourable impression on the visitor. The standard of civilization of any nation is largely judged by the size and style of its public buildings. The foreigner must judge from the buildings provided for science, art, and history that these are elements of civilization for which the people of New Zealand have no care or pride. As a national institution the Dominion Museum building must surely undo much of the reputation for enlightenment and efficiency which successive Governments of the Dominion have striven so well to create. As an advertising proposition alone the erection of a new building is overdue.

Finally, if what has been said above is not convincing as to the immediate necessity of a new building, the position in regard to New Zealand's part in the war should overcome all doubts. The Imperial Government have founded an Imperial War Museum to record for all time the valour of the Empire's fighting services, the sacrifices of the Empire's peoples, and the ability of the inventors, scientists, and manufacturers. In its small way the Dominion Museum has pursued the same objects in the foundation of a War Section, which nevertheless has grown to such dimensions as to exhaust all the available exhibition and store space. Meanwhile the War Records Section of the Defence Department in London has made large collections of all kinds, including many pictures and sketches, and had influenced the Allied Governments to send to New Zealand collections illustrating their equipment. The existing accommodation is utterly inadequate even to store this material, now coming to hand, and further buildings are imperative. The planning and commencement of a new building should not be delayed a single month.