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McKenzie, John 1839 - 1901

Farmer, politician, political reformer

Sometime in May 1845 the five-year-old John McKenzie was woken by his father before dawn and marched off on a 16-mile walk to the small Presbyterian church at Croick in eastern Ross-shire, Scotland. On the way the young McKenzie saw something he would never forget: the once proud people of Glencalvie huddled in a graveyard after being evicted from their land by an unscrupulous landlord. This memory would shape his whole life's philosophy and work.

John McKenzie was born at Tolly on the Ardross estate, eastern Ross-shire, on 6 October 1839 - not 1838 as he believed. (It was in fact his illegitimate half-brother, also named John, who was born 'in adultery' in 1838.) He was the second son of Catherine Munro and her husband, John McKenzie. John McKenzie senior was a small tenant farmer, not a crofter as some accounts suggest, and was reputed to be a fine stockman who had carried out successful experiments with lime. Ardross was well known throughout Britain as an improved estate.

By the time McKenzie was a teenager, his father was farming at Baldoon - also on the Ardross estate - and hiring two employees on a regular basis. John McKenzie senior belonged to the respectable lower middle class of north-eastern Scotland and imparted to his son a respect for scientific farming. Young John McKenzie undertook the rural apprenticeship typical of the region, beginning as a shepherd before advancing slowly to run a croft and eventually a leasehold farm of his own.

McKenzie's hatred of landlordism was fuelled by the fires of the disruption, when the Free Church of Scotland broke from the Church of Scotland, as well as by the pilgrimage to Croick. Only 50 of the local congregation of 3,000 refused to join the Free Church. The Free Church activists included McKenzie's teacher, Charles Ross, who drummed the virtues of democracy into his pupils and imparted the gift of literacy. The trauma of these events was reinforced by the death of Catherine McKenzie, probably in the late 1840s when famine swept through the area. The early death of McKenzie's mother removed an important tie to the Highlands.

John McKenzie remained a Gaelic speaker even though his minister, David Carment, spoke only English. McKenzie's basic source of inspiration, the Bible, was read in Gaelic. His lapses into Gaelic when taunted later by the Greek and Latin jibes of his classically educated political opponents suggest that he was at home in his native Highland tongue.

John McKenzie's early adulthood was stormy and socially awkward. As a youth he fathered a daughter while still unmarried. When the mother refused to accompany him to New Zealand he publicly accepted responsibility for the child, Johan McKenzie, who was born on 23 June 1859. By giving her his name he partially removed the stigma of illegitimacy. On 23 May 1860 at Dingwall, Ross-shire, John McKenzie married Ann Munro, six years his senior and daughter of a deceased tenant farmer. The couple sailed immediately for Otago, New Zealand. McKenzie provided maintenance for Johan McKenzie and was finally united with the daughter he had never seen when he returned to Scotland in 1899. No one judged him harshly for a commonplace pattern of behaviour in the Highlands and Johan was brought up by her mother's family. In New Zealand, Ann and John McKenzie were to have six children.

The McKenzies disembarked from the *Henrietta* at Port Chalmers on 24 September 1860. After recuperating from a short illness John McKenzie spent some time looking for work. He eventually found a job with Johnny Jones, the wealthy whaler and runholder. McKenzie later quipped that his time as a hill-country shepherd provided ideal training for the job of parliamentary whip. His

skill as a stockman and familiarity with the demands of hilly country, remarkably similar to that of Ross-shire, guaranteed him rapid promotion. By 1863 he was managing one of Jones's giant runs at Puketapu. Within two years he had saved enough to buy a 76-acre property, valued at 10s. an acre, situated 2½ miles north of Palmerston. He named the farm Ardross. The land was ordinary but McKenzie had achieved the independence of his dreams.

Immediately after purchasing the farm he spent his nights practising speeches in English and reading everything he could about land law and Scottish history. In 1865 he was elected to the Bushey Road Board as clerk and treasurer, and served as secretary on the new Palmerston school committee in the same year.

In 1868 he ran for the Waikouaiti electorate of the Otago Provincial Council. He attached himself to the prominent Scottish land 'radical', Donald Reid, but his poor public speaking and relative newness in the district combined to defeat his first attempt to win higher office. In 1871 he was elected to the Otago Provincial Council where he joined the now dominant Reid faction. This victory was a remarkable achievement, for he defeated the well-known wealthy landowner, John Douglas, a man who was much better educated and a far more proficient public speaker.

McKenzie threw himself into the work of the council but soon fell out with Reid whose policies once in office proved to be less radical than his supposedly conservative predecessors. The politically raw John McKenzie had yet to learn the art of compromise and earned himself the label of 'extremist'. The only politician to win his favour was the Shetland-born radical, Robert Stout. This was an unlikely alliance because Stout was a freethinker and an urban-based theoretical radical, but he did support McKenzie's call for the closer settlement of the land and the introduction of some form of leasehold tenure to prevent more land being locked up.

McKenzie became a noisy maverick who failed in his endeavours to have the Central Otago railway line run through North Otago. This was an obvious blow to his morale. In 1874 he moved to a much bigger 1,000-acre farm near Dunback, which he named Oykell. Although this property was rough, it offered better security against the vicissitudes of politics than the small farm at Palmerston.

Once it became clear that the provincial councils would be abolished, McKenzie gained a seat in 1877 on the Waikouaiti County Council; he also helped set up the Waihemo County Council and became its foundation chairman in 1882. Much of his spare time was spent entertaining would-be supporters and expanding his range of local contacts. His neighbours reckoned him to be a rather ordinary farmer, more interested in the cut and thrust of political debate than the daily grind of routine chores. He was elected MHR for Moeraki in December 1881.

John McKenzie's parliamentary career before he became a minister was not especially distinguished. He did, however, win himself a reputation as an authoritative speaker on land issues and was acknowledged as a conscientious and energetic whip during the Stout--Vogel ministry of 1884--87. He is best remembered during this period for his attempt in 1882 to limit the size of sheep flocks and cattle herds. He also tried to control the dubious practice of 'dummyism', whereby landowners illegally added to their estates by purchasing in the names of other people. Both efforts proved futile: the size limit was openly flouted and he succeeded in securing only one prosecution for dummyism - against Gellibrand and Company, a Tasmanian-controlled operation, in 1883.

McKenzie found the life of an MHR an expensive business and struggled to make ends meet. Things improved in 1888 when he moved to a better farm, Heathfield, near Shag Point. He was able to grow grain as well as raise sheep and achieved greater economic security. However, even this farm was not especially profitable or fertile. Much of it was broken up by steep ridges, limiting the cropping area, and it carried 1,700 sheep at most. The payment of an adequate salary

to MHRs from 1893 brought greater financial relief.

John McKenzie's expertise on land matters won him the post of minister of lands in the Liberal cabinet from 1891 to 1900. He is best remembered for four things he achieved while holding that office: the introduction of a graduated land tax, which was incorporated in John Ballance's Land and Income Assessment Act 1891; the lease-in-perpetuity tenure or 999-year lease, which was the major feature of the Land Act 1892; the purchase of the Cheviot Hills estate in 1893 under the auspices of the Land and Income Assessment Act 1891; and the state's right of compulsory purchase, which was introduced under the Land for Settlements Act 1894. The celebrated Cheviot purchase was in fact forced on the government, but McKenzie seized the opportunity to make it a symbol of Liberal settlement policy. The land acts of 1892 were circumscribed by limited funding and did not produce nearly as many successful settlements as the more generously funded Land for Settlements Act 1894. The 1892 Land Act made the notion of the Queen's chain more explicit than any other piece of legislation: McKenzie wanted all New Zealanders to be able to fish the rivers, lakes and coasts and to enjoy unrestricted access to forests and mountains.

The efficacy of McKenzie's policies continues to be a subject for debate. Nevertheless, 1.3 million acres of land was opened up for closer settlement. Some 7,000 farmers and their families moved onto these properties, revitalised the countryside and accelerated New Zealand's move away from a 'plantation' type of agriculture to family farming.

McKenzie worked with Joseph Ward to provide both new leaseholders and small freehold farmers with cheap credit through the Government Advances to Settlers Office established in 1894. As minister for agriculture from 1891 to 1900, McKenzie also tried to bring advice and other forms of assistance to farmers by taking a close personal interest in developing the work of the Department of Agriculture, established in 1892. He consolidated, centralised and made more coercive a whole range of agricultural legislation, greatly increasing the regulatory activities of the state in the process. A veritable army of inspectors was appointed, not only to ensure clean milk production but also to control a vast range of agricultural pests. Dairy industry acts passed in 1892, 1894 and 1898 tried to ensure that clean milk was produced in the milking shed and delivered to the dairy factory in good condition. The Slaughtering and Inspection Act 1900 tried to protect consumers against the sale of rotten meat and further increased the number of inspectors. Much less attention was paid to scientific research; government assistance was confined to employing a handful of advisers and the establishment of experimental dairy farms. McKenzie ran the department in a very direct manner and gave little leeway to his secretary, J. D. Ritchie. McKenzie's agricultural legislation and administration of the department made a very practical contribution to the development of New Zealand farming, especially North Island dairy farming.

McKenzie's other major contribution was the role he played in making land still held under Maori ownership available for sale. A series of acts passed between 1892 and 1895 established a Validation Court to sort out Maori title, introduced a new system of land boards to purchase land and set up the Native Appellate Court to resolve disputed purchases. This tripartite structure operated free from the restraints of the Native Department, which was wound up in 1892. McKenzie played a major part in enacting these laws along with Ballance, Richard Seddon and James Carroll.

The new system worked so efficiently that 2,729,000 acres of Maori land were bought by the government between 1892 and 1900. Virtually full Crown pre-emption was introduced between 1892 and 1894, although a further 423,184 acres were purchased on the free market. Land bought by the Crown was acquired at a price of between 4 and 6s. per acre and sold for around £2 per acre. The little-known Lands Improvement and Native Lands Acquisition Act 1894 also made available £250,000 per annum for two years for the roading and development of Maori land

purchased by the Crown.

Why should an angry Highlander who had based his political career on a determination to prevent anything like the clearances occurring in New Zealand have been intent on alienating such a huge area of Maori land? The answer is complex. Political expediency played a major part because the Liberals were essentially a South Island government who badly needed North Island rural support. Prevailing social Darwinist notions concerning the superiority of British culture over that of indigenous peoples influenced McKenzie along with many contemporary politicians. Yet something more was involved.

McKenzie argued on several occasions that the state would be a more benevolent purchaser than the land sharks who gained from the wars of the 1860s. He even compared the speculators of Auckland with the evicting landlords of Scotland and England. He believed that under the new structures genuine settlers would be able to buy or lease farmland at a fair price, so making productive a resource which had formerly lain idle and been used for speculative purposes only. He held a poor view of Maori farming ability and seemed unaware that some tribes had engaged in successful sheepfarming. No compensation was made to Maori settlers whereas the big estate owners were generously compensated and allowed to keep large areas for themselves. Maori were administratively excluded from the benefits of the Government Advances to Settlers Act 1894, and so were denied the capital they desperately needed. McKenzie viewed Maori communal ownership as a serious block to progress. He determined to drag Maori and settler into the modern world of scientific farming.

McKenzie was so deeply involved with the Departments of Lands and Survey and of Agriculture that there is little else to distinguish his time as a minister. He rarely spoke on any other issue and when he did he revealed himself to be much more conservative than he was on the land issue. For example, he favoured capital punishment, opposed women's franchise and was critical of the trade union movement. Four other facets of the man who was effectively deputy premier from 1896 to 1900 and acted as premier in Seddon's absence are, however, worthy of comment.

First, McKenzie was a modern-style politician in that he was loyal to his party. Once he decided to support Ballance he dropped his preference for free trade, and he later became a devoted supporter of Seddon when the big West Coaster proved his worth over the Otago-based Stout. As the years went by McKenzie became increasingly frustrated by the political mavericks who continually thwarted Seddon's attempts to build a modern party machine. Like Seddon he was a populist for whom politics was a full-time career. Party discipline ensured that vital legislation found its way onto the statute books.

Again, McKenzie, like Seddon, William Pember Reeves and Ward, was a South Islander. His enormous popularity probably did not extend much beyond Cook Strait. No other farmer ever assumed such prominence within the Liberal party and his retirement in 1900 severely weakened the party's hold on the rural electorates.

Further, McKenzie was a model of honesty in comparison with some other prominent Liberals, especially Seddon and Ward. Pro-Liberal papers like the *New Zealand Times* referred to him as 'Honest Jock', and his relatively clean record stood the government in good stead during the critical Bank of New Zealand crisis in 1894--95.

Finally, McKenzie proved himself to be a man who was intolerant of criticism. In 1894 he introduced a Newspaper Libel Limitation Bill (which did not become law) demanding that journalists sign everything they wrote. In return for their openness they would face fines or even prison sentences of up to two years if articles could be proven libellous. Like many a radical who has wanted to get things done, he was impatient of anything that stood in his way.

By 1897 it became clear that McKenzie's health was failing. In an effort to effect a cure he made a visit to London in 1899 where he underwent surgery. The operation was apparently successful and he recuperated in his old family home on Baldoon in Ross-shire. He was welcomed back as a returning hero but asked to downplay his criticisms of the situation in Scotland. On his return to New Zealand he was re-elected unopposed for Waihemo in 1899. Unfortunately, his health worsened and he was forced to resign on 27 June 1900. By this time it was clear that he had an incurable cancer of the bladder. On 25 June 1901 he was appointed a KCMG by the visiting duke of Cornwall and of York on the train which stopped at Heathfield outside his farmhouse. He died on 6 August 1901, survived by his wife and five children.

McKenzie was given an elaborate funeral befitting a laird rather than a tenant farmer's son. Pipers played 'Flowers of the forest' and people wept openly. It was an appropriate choice of lament because lost battles of the past had prompted McKenzie to win a bigger victory in the 'Britain of the South'. He was buried in Palmerston cemetery along with the people he had championed. A cairn to commemorate his achievements was also erected on the top of Pukehiwitahi overlooking the Heathfield farm. Eventually it collapsed and in 1929 Sir Joseph Ward initiated the construction of a new cairn at Puketapu, high above Palmerston. From this imposing site the cairn gazes from the same spot where the big Highlander determined to unlock the lands for the people.

The cairn does not, however, attest to the fact that McKenzie realised his modest and practicable dreams at the expense of the Maori. His land for settlements policy assured him a place in the national hall of fame but his native land policy widened the fracture in the New Zealand dream.

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