



As lawyer and politician, Downie Stewart affected New Zealand's legal system.

He was born near Stirling, Scotland, the fourth of 10 children of Alexander Stewart and Mary, nee Downie, and grew up on his parents small farm, cutting turf for the small fire to help pay for his education. His legal training began in Stirling and continued after he emigrated to Dunedin aged 19. In 1867 he was admitted to the bar and set up his own practice, joined by a succession of pupils and partners. In 1868 he married Rachel Hepburn, the daughter of an early settler.

As a lawyer, W.D.Stewart was highly respected. His keen interest in his profession led to a trip to the USA in 1875 to study the legal system there, while his social concerns led to him being a founder of the Patients' and Prisoners' Aid Society in 1877. He was one of three lawyers who drafted the District Law Societies Act in 1878 to raise professional standards, and he chaired the meeting which set up the Otago-Southland society in 1879.

He entered Parliament in 1878 and although he lost his seat in 1881 was re-elected 1884-90. He introduced numerous reforms, including a system of legal aid. The Strikes and Board of Arbitration Bill which he prepared and carried to a second reading in 1890 became the basis of New Zealand's arbitration system. Downie Stewart retired from Parliament in 1890 and was appointed to the Legislative Council where he continued to support liberal legislation such as the women's suffrage bill. He died on 25 November 1898, and is buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.

His first wife had died in 1878 and his second wife, Mary, nee Thomson, and their daughter soon left New Zealand, but the four surviving children of his first marriage, Rachelina Hepburn Stewart, George Hepburn Stewart, Mary Downie Stewart and William Downie Stewart, all became prominent in public life.