

# Why bother trying to write a slightly different kind of political biography?

## *A portrait of Sir John McKenzie (1838–1901)*

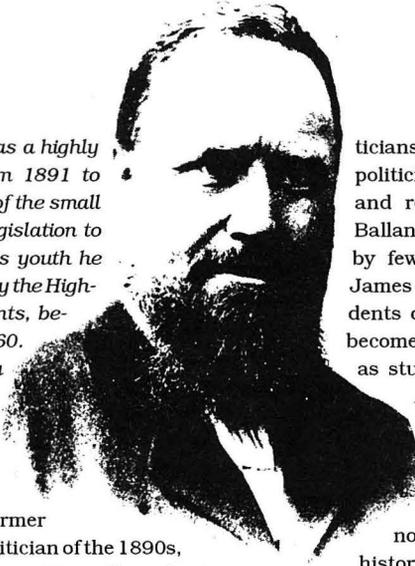
*Sir John McKenzie (1838–1901) was a highly influential Minister of Lands from 1891 to 1900 who promulgated the cause of the small settler landholder and initiated legislation to break up the larger estates. In his youth he had witnessed the misery caused by the Highland landlords evicting their tenants, before his emigration to Dunedin in 1860. In this article Tom Brooking gives a preview of his forthcoming somewhat unusual political biography.*

TOM BROOKING

TODAY THE SIX FOOT FOUR INCH, eight-  
een stone John McKenzie, land reformer  
and the second most important politician of the 1890s,  
is little remembered outside Otago. Even there he is  
mainly known as a rather mysterious and distant figure  
whose life is commemorated by the imposing cairn above  
Palmerston which gazes down at travellers from the sym-  
metrical hill of Puketapu. School certificate and bursary  
students have a brief encounter with McKenzie's legisla-  
tion but most seem to have forgotten all about it by the  
time they get to university. Kenneth Cumberland's televi-  
sion series *Landmarks* revived a little interest but the  
impact was about as fleeting as most associated with that  
'instant' media. The 'Hon Jock' or the 'Red McKenzie' as he  
was known by contemporaries, also gets a mention in Tom  
Steele's *Scotland's Story* made for Scottish television, but  
Television New Zealand decided that the fact that Scots  
made up more than a fifth of European migrants to Aotearoa  
was insufficient reason to buy the programmes. There was  
brief mention too in the 'Celts' series but few seemed to  
notice. Since *Landmarks*, revisionist historians have seen  
to it that impersonal forces have the late nineteenth cen-  
tury firmly in their grasp. Individual poli-

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*Sir John McKenzie: Minister of Lands and Agriculture 1891-1899. [Alexander Turnbull Library]*



iticians have taken a back seat as the 'genus'  
politician has become ever more unpopular  
and recent excellent biographies of John  
Ballance and Edward Tregear have been read  
by few other than professional historians.  
James Macandrew's claim that future stu-  
dents of ancient New Zealand history would  
become as familiar with the 'McKenzie clause'  
as students of ancient Rome were with the  
Agrarian Law has proven to be wildly  
optimistic.

Given this apparent public indif-  
ference, the absence of a collection of  
personal papers and the fact that I do  
not subscribe to the great man theory of  
history, why am I attempting to write a biog-  
raphy on John McKenzie? The answer is threefold. First,  
even though the issue of land reform and land tenure may  
seem arcane to the modern reader the matter of who  
controls and owns the land still helps determine the  
distribution of wealth, power and status in modern soci-  
ety. Second, this compelling story provides the historian  
with an ideal means of asking some 'big' questions about  
the nature of our historical development. Third, I hope  
that the book will support the work of Miles Fairburn,  
David Thomson, Brad Patterson, Judith Binney, Ranganui  
Walker and other radical Maori historians, and feminist  
historians, in dealing a fatal blow to the smug 'whiggish'  
paradigm that still dominates the writing of our history.

The best means of owing and using land was the  
central debate in late nineteenth century New Zealand for  
the men of both races. It was more fundamental than any  
other, even that concerning the relationship between  
capital and labour. Militant unionism had, after all, been  
smashed by the end of the Maritime Strike of 1890 and  
arbitration was meekly accepted by the beaten unions as  
at least a workable solution. But the land question had not  
been resolved. There was a widespread consensus that

closer settlement was a good thing which made McKenzie's actions more acceptable, but there was still a bitter debate concerning the best means of achieving the desirable social end of putting more people on the land. My analysis of the efficacy of McKenzie's policies will show that they were flawed in several important respects, but the central importance of the land issue ensured that McKenzie was propelled into the political limelight and became the most important politician after Seddon. He was also the only farmer in cabinet and over the decade of the 1890s he was more important than either William Pember Reeves or Joseph Ward and was at least as important as Ballance. His legislation and administration of the Departments of Land and Agriculture and his responsibility for Maori land purchase ensured that he was both a major architect and builder of the social laboratory. Whatever his failures there can be no denying his enormous electoral popularity which was critical during the difficult years from 1895-1900 in holding together the rather fragile Liberal party. Indeed in parts of the colony, especially North Otago and Canterbury, he was a folk hero, a kind of benevolent giant who slew the monster of oligarchy, burst open the heavily defended kingdom of land monopoly and unlocked the gates of opportunity for the ordinary people of New Zealand. This potent mythology will be questioned but its contemporary and historical importance will also be acknowledged.

The biographical form helps provide a framework from which to ask some bigger questions which if posed by themselves would only be of interest to the specialist. The four 'big' questions I will try and address are: did state action make any difference to outcomes or would market forces have broken up the great estates and encouraged more intensive forms of family farming anyway?; did Liberal Government initiatives help push New Zealand down a different development trajectory from Argentina, Uruguay and Australia?; how far is the McKenzie story 'Hartzian', that is stressing British historical experience, rather than 'Turnerian', that is stressing interaction with the New Zealand environment, indigenous people and

political system?; and did ideas play a more important part in shaping this supposedly pragmatic politician's actions than historians like Sir Keith Sinclair and David Hamer have suggested?

The first two questions have become rather more topical than when I began the project twenty years ago. In a sense I have been lucky in taking so long to complete the book because the advent of 'Rogernomics' in 1984 has undermined many of the old certainties and givens of New Zealand political history.

We can no longer assume that state action made things better but nor should we follow current economic fashion blindly and assume that state interference made things worse. Some of my analysis will have to venture into the 'counterfactual' but I will try to keep it anchored to historical reality where I can. I am also determined to judge the Liberals' actions according to their own objectives as well as according to supposedly more 'objective' criteria which could tell us more about the current condition of the 'dismal science' than about this particular period of historical development. Comparisons with countries whose economies were almost as dependent on pastoral farming as New Zealand, like

Argentina, Uruguay and Australia, should broaden the analysis so that we can discern whether or not the Liberal Land reform policy has any applicability to the practice of land reform in other places and times.

McKenzie's Highland background and personal experience of the clearances obviously provides a key to understanding the story but it would be a mistake to view the McKenzie saga as nothing more than an extension of what John Pocock calls 'British history.' Jock was fighting out old world battles on a new world battlefield but he also had to modify his views to suit New Zealand conditions. Like several of the Liberals McKenzie seemed to have the ability to adopt models that were working well overseas and then adapt them to meet the peculiarities of the New Zealand situation. McKenzie was no slavish follower of



**THE MINISTERIAL SCHOOL—HON. JOCK AS DOMINE.**

The newspaper correspondents wire that the Hon. John McKenzie will boss the work of the cabinet while Premiere Seddon is away in Hobart. Also that the Hon. Hall Jones is the Minister whose work is giving least satisfaction.

*The number two man is left in charge of lesser ministers. Hall-Jones is in the dunce's cap, Carroll is shooting peas. [Seddon Papers, 3/61, National Archives.]*

Scottish or British fashion not only because he was pragmatic but because he deliberately rejected aspects of his Highland heritage and because ideas rather than doctrinaire theories helped shape his actions. Metropolitan intellectuals like André Siegfried and Albert Metin or Beatrice and Sidney Webb, were as shocked by the cavalier attitude towards theory adopted by most of the leading Liberals as David Hamer seems to be. They all miss the point because most Liberals were influenced by a great complex of ideas which imposed a moral order on their world. This complex can be untangled if the historian reads the Parliamentary Debates with care and in good 'post-modern' fashion 'unpacks' the imagery and metaphor.

When this task is completed it is quite clear that the bible lay at the core of the New Zealand Liberal vision and its influence was extended by the 'ruralist' view that the country way of life was morally superior to city living, and therefore socially preferable. Other key strands were the egalitarian and democratic hopes of the holder artisan radical tradition and the argument of the 'new Liberalism' that state intervention was required to remove the worst abuses of uncontrolled operation of the free market. McKenzie was influenced by these different sources and enacted his policies primarily to solve moral problems; economic considerations limited the scope of his reforms but were never a motivating factor. Like other key Liberals he was also a supreme optimist who believed that the colony's problems could be solved by resolute action and who rejected the bleak prognosis of capitalism made by the Reverend Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith and Karl Marx. McKenzie believed that Capitalism could be reformed without violent revolution or demographic catastrophe and environmental disaster.

The McKenzie story also raises some interesting questions on a somewhat less grand scale. An obvious one is how far did McKenzie's personal anger at the great historical injustice of the Highland clearances tap into a deeper folk anger concerning dispossession of many English and

Irish as well as Scottish migrants. Equally important is the extent to which McKenzie was responsible for the rapid alienation of Maori land in the 1890s. Then there is the matter of how he and Seddon were able to stop such an embryonic party as the Liberals from splintering into competing factions. Finally, I must test McKenzie's reputation for honesty and fathom how a land radical was also able to be a social conservative and champion of respectability.



#### EYE TO EYE AND HAND IN HAND

PREMIERE DICK (to his Hellan' Lieutenant): Eh, mon Jock, the wish is father to the thought with them when they say there's dissension in the Cabinet. We're as happy as a pair of turtle doves or a couple of winged angels—ain't we Jock?

[Seddon Papers, 3/61, National Archives.]

The problem of the smug, even downright complacent 'whiggish' paradigm of New Zealand history, remains to be attacked. Most of our history still seems to be shaped by the idea that things are getting better all the time (to borrow from John Lennon) and only a handful of historians have bothered to ask the obvious question, better for whom? So we tend to view the physical deprivations of the pioneers with an almost voyeuristic glee while failing to note the parallels between the 'larrikins' of the 1880s and the hungry street kids of the 1990s. We are also still inclined to view our history in terms of light and dark eras. So the Liberal and Labour governments tend to be viewed as enlightened and Reform, the Coalition and National as reactionary.

Such a view is altogether too simplistic and I shall be endeavouring to show that there were plenty of losers in the social laboratory and that the Liberal vision was flawed and limited. On the other hand I also intend to judge the Liberals from the perspective of the late nineteenth century rather than the late 1930s. If this is done the Liberals appear much more radical than most revisionists have suggested. Refrigeration did not solve New Zealand's problems instantaneously and the Liberals made their own history in a way which would please E.P. Thompson even if their actions have disappointed Marxists and would horrify current Treasury economists. Their boldness in trying to defy dialectics and in taking strong action before economic recovery set in deserves applause. A robust commonsense which tempered most of McKenzie's administration is deserving of equally strong commendation.

If New Zealanders were raised on more realistic

historical paradigms like those of Benedetto Croce they would realise that each generation has to fight the same battles all over again but in their own way. The lessons of the past can provide rough guidelines but the details have to be worked out afresh; as Ranganui Walker has put it the struggle is without end. From the early 1990s the view that New Zealand history is a tale of untrammelled progress looks a little odd, especially now that the welfarist model, its supposed culmination, is in a state of collapse.

The Liberals themselves were seduced by Reeves' propaganda and became complacent once their first victories were won. The impetus for further reform was thereby lost soon after McKenzie's death. Concern with their own generational problems rather than the children of the future limited the on-going effectiveness of their reforms even more. Later generations then compounded this problem when they came to accept Liberal innovations as givens, or birth rights, or outmoded aberrations. Defence of a proud democratic heritage was forgotten about and most of the gains of both the first Labour Government and more recently the Liberals, have been lost or surrendered in a meek fashion that would horrify McKenzie as much as it would shock Fraser, Savage, Nash or Lee.

These issues can be addressed without doing too much injury to the structure of the biography. McKenzie's funeral is a cultural anthropologist's dream but I decided instead to start with McKenzie's childhood encounter with the horror and trauma of the clearances. Normal chronology is then resumed until McKenzie becomes a Minister. A thematic approach is adopted as his efforts as Minister of Lands, Minister in charge of Native Land Purchase and Minister of Agriculture, are analysed in turn. The 'other' concerns of McKenzie are then considered before the major controversies of his career (the Pomohaka, Horowhenua and Bushy Park purchases) are subjected to detailed scutiny.

The book continues in chronological fashion by tracing through his fight with cancer of the bladder, his trip 'home' to Scotland, retirement, knighthood and death. Because I do not believe that an individual's influence disappears the instant that their physical body dies I

conclude the book with an epilogue examining the memorials erected in McKenzie's memory, noting some interesting ironies concerning his life, and exploring the longer term impact of the McKenzie legacy and mythology.

The book opens with a Gaelic lament for the loss of the land and conclude with a similar Maori lament to underscore the central irony that a Highlander committed to preventing a repeat of the clearances in the new world should help to dispossess an indigenous people of most of their remaining cultivable land.

Maps and graphs will obviously be critical in establishing which estates were broken up, how much Maori land was purchased and how McKenzie's performance compared with that of his immediate predecessors and successors. Similarly cartoons will be used as sources in their own right because they helped shape the public image of politicians in much the same way as television does today.

All in all it seems a book that it is well worth bothering to write even if such an exercise is not academically fashionable. When completed it may help bear out James Macandrew's prediction. Even if it doesn't it will make quite clear that

McKenzie's initial support for the politician after whom this research centre is named gave way to unrelenting hostility once Sir Robert Stout was passed over for leadership of the Liberal Party in 1893. Thereafter the paths of the two Highland born radicals diverged as the practical rural reformer became more effectively radical than the urban theorist.

*From a Stout Research Centre seminar held on 1 April 1992.*

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**THE HONORABLE JOCK AS A SOCIAL PEST CRUSHER.**

The McKenzie: It's not a man I'm crushing. It's only a small butcher, who sells rotten meat, and what is he after all but a sassenach and another social pest.

*[Seddon Papers, 3/61, National Archives.]*