



Henry Smith Fish was born in Pimlico, London, England, on 15 July 1838 to Mary Ann Passmore and her husband, Henry Smith Fish, a painter. Henry Fish, junior, as he was known for most of his life, received some education at Cave House School, Uxbridge, and later at Melbourne, Australia, where his family settled in about 1849. At the age of 13 or 14, he accompanied his father to the Ovens diggings. On their return they went into business as painters and glaziers, a trade which both men pursued when the family removed to Dunedin, New Zealand, around 1863.

On 31 January 1867, Henry Fish married Jane Carr at St Paul's Church in Dunedin. They were to have 13 children. That year marked his entry to public life with his election as a Dunedin city councillor. Henceforth, politics became almost his principal vocation, although his involvement with the firm H. S. Fish and Son continued. His early attempts to attract public attention were met with scathing ridicule and throughout his career he received some of the harshest criticism directed at any of the city's politicians. He was reviled by the press as conceited, unmannered and untrustworthy. Constant puns were made on his name; he was, for instance, called 'the Talking Fish' and was said to resemble a

member of the cuttle species because of the amount of ink he threw when attacked.

Fish joined the Otago Provincial Council in 1870 at a time of controversy. He soon pushed himself to the fore. After flirting with Henry Driver's squatter faction, which saw him as a potential superintendent, he allied himself with the opposing group led by Donald Reid. Fish assisted Reid's campaign in the dramatic election of 1871 but lost his own seat in the council. Returned in 1873, he helped effect a split in Reid's 'Liberal party' which destroyed it as the leading force in provincial politics. Aided by Driver and the licensed victuallers, Fish also directed James Macandrew's campaign for the superintendency that year and displayed in the process his remarkable talent for electioneering. At such times he was everywhere to be seen as he 'battered up men whom a short time since he bespattered.'

Fish gave more than 20 years' service to the Dunedin City Council, six of these as mayor. His election in 1879, however, was overturned because a contract with the council disqualified him. He was a member of the Otago Harbour Board for six years; in this capacity and as a councillor he was sometimes regarded as the special advocate of the contractor David Proudfoot. He was also involved in numerous organisations, including Oddfellows' and Masonic lodges. His Masonic connections appear to have been useful politically but religion was less attractive to him: he worshipped vicariously by sending his wife and children to church. While serving as resident magistrate for Dunedin, he demonstrated a relaxed morality by his lenience towards a well-known brothel-keeper.

Fish won the Dunedin South seat for the House of Representatives in 1881. There were hints that William Larnach had connived in Fish's victory by discouraging opposition with his own candidature and withdrawing at the last. No such strategies could save Fish from defeat in 1884. Shortly before the poll, his long-time antagonist, H. J. Walter, published allegations that he had taken bribes from Proudfoot over a city council contract. Voters were also reminded of an equity case in 1877 from which Fish had emerged very badly. This ruined his chances of re-election and Fish suffered further loss of face when he declined Walter's invitation to test the charges in a libel action.

Unrepentant, he stood again in 1887. The daily papers warned electors not to return 'one who lies under an accusation of the worst crime a public man can commit.' Fish posed as a martyr and his

large majority in the poll suggested that many now considered his sins to be trifling; others believed his election cast 'a slur upon the whole town.'

Fish portrayed himself as a working man's champion. The working classes supported him in the 1880s, although the Journeymen Painters' Society of Otago disliked him for his employment of unqualified labour. His popularity among the working men of South Dunedin kept him in office in 1890 but he soon fell out with the new Liberal government after being overlooked for the chairmanship of committees, and he abandoned the Liberal-Labour ticket on which he was elected. In the House, Fish resisted legislative proposals to extend the franchise to women and organised two petitions against these measures, probably with assistance from the Licensed Victuallers' Association of New Zealand. His prominence among those hostile to the reform may have done the suffragists a service. Fish's ill-judged attacks on women brought little credit to his cause and his private morality became part of the debate. His petitions stimulated the formation in 1892 of a number of women's franchise leagues which strenuously opposed him in politics.

The Women's Franchise League in Dunedin claimed responsibility for Fish's defeat in the mayoral contest of 1892, and the female vote was said to be the main reason for his failure to gain re-election to Parliament in 1893. Fish, who opposed the Liberal government, won back his seat in 1896. During this campaign his speech was noticeably enfeebled by a throat ailment. The condition proved to be cancer. He died in Dunedin on 23 September 1897, survived by his wife, six daughters and two sons. It was rumoured prior to his death that he had inherited £30,000 from a brother in Liverpool. Fish's estate, however, was small and his executors realised only several thousand pounds after struggling with his disorganised accounts.

Despite his long years in politics Fish is hardly memorable for his legislative achievements. Principles and ideologies were not his motivation. He loved politics for the recognition and acclaim it brought and for its personal conflicts, in which he revelled. In business as well as public affairs, he was valued for his common sense and forthright action. Fish was an astute tactician endowed with outstanding industry and fluency. With his 'leathery lungs, and the roughest of tongues' he could speak for hours with a happy disregard for the niceties of English grammar.

He was no party man and his inconstancy precluded him from the

ministerial status he craved. Easily antagonised, his speeches were often abusive and he participated in some disgraceful brawls. It was a joke around Parliament that 'in England we used to go to Billingsgate for our fish; here we go to Fish for our Billingsgate.' His vanity was notorious: 'His very walk about the legislative buildings, as also his manner, indicated a feeling on his part that he alone was fit to be Governor, Premier and dictator.'

There was a perception among certain businessmen that Fish's opinions could be influenced by a tip and he never shrugged off the suggestions of petty corruption which dogged his career. The people of South Dunedin nevertheless responded to him with loyalty and enthusiasm. 'The goody-goodies don't like him', wrote one journalist, 'because he doesn't pretend to be more virtuous in politics than any other member'. To some, this transparency was a virtue and his many friends never admired him for his saintliness. (Plot 100, Block 9, Anglican Section, Southern Cemetery)

F. R. J. SINCLAIR

The cyclopedia of New Zealand. Vol. 4. Christchurch, 1905

Obit. *Otago Daily Times.* 24 Sept. 1897