



Mackenzie, Thomas Noble 1853 - 1930
Storekeeper, explorer, conservationist, politician, marketing agent, prime minister, diplomat

Thomas Noble Mackenzie was born on 10 March 1853 in Edinburgh, Scotland, one of five children of David Stewart Mackenzie, a gardener, and his wife, Rebecca Noble. In 1858 the family emigrated to Dunedin, New Zealand, on the *Robert Henderson*. They settled in St Clair, and Mackenzie attended Green Island School. Later they shifted to North East Valley and Thomas went to the local primary school and the North Dunedin District School, where he was probably taught by the young Robert Stout.

After working as a clerk in various mercantile firms, Mackenzie joined his brother James as a surveyor in the lower North Island. He tried bush farming briefly before setting himself up as a storekeeper in Balclutha in 1877. His business became sufficiently profitable for him to marry, and on 24 September 1884 he wed Ida Henrietta Nantes of Geelong, Victoria, at Balclutha; they were to have five sons and two daughters.

Mackenzie served his political apprenticeship on the Balclutha Borough Council from 1881 to 1887 and established contact with local farmers. He won recognition for his fight to ensure that seeds sold by merchants were true to label, and was elected MHR for Clutha in 1887. Mackenzie opposed protectionism because it was not in the best interests of farmers. He was an ardent freeholder who supported the property rather than the land tax. However, he supported John McKenzie's lease-in-perpetuity, because he viewed it as a virtual freehold. He also favoured the closer settlement policies of the Liberal government and was rather an odd ally of the big landowners who dominated the parliamentary opposition. He differed little from the Liberal freeholders, and his friendship with James Allen, MHR for Bruce, seems to have been as important as any philosophical considerations in his decision to oppose the Liberal government. He made witty and well-informed speeches that occasionally threatened to become bombastic.

Mackenzie spent much time exploring Fiordland and the Catlins district. He took part in the attempts to find Professor Mainwaring Brown of the University of Otago in 1888, and Quintin McKinnon, Mackenzie's regular companion in exploration, in 1892. He also helped open up the Milford Track and found the Mackenzie Pass leading to Dusky Sound. Mackenzie was made a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1898. He had a genuine love of 'the wild west' and found the joy of discovering the unknown provided the perfect escape from the tedium of politics. He suggested as early as 1894 that Fiordland should be made into a national park, criticised the Liberals for opening bush reserves for settlement, argued that seals and various native birds should be protected, and introduced a forest and bird protection motion in 1893. Mackenzie and James Wilson, MHR for Otaki, formed a lonely duet in a Parliament which viewed the bush as the major barrier to progress and an enemy to be vanquished.

Mackenzie resigned from Parliament in 1896 because he became frustrated with the essentially negative role required of opposition members. Wishing to make a more constructive contribution to the colony's development, he became the London marketing agent for several farmers' co-operatives. He worked hard in England to stop the sale of New Zealand meat as English and strongly supported the Department of Agriculture's insistence on the proper branding and quality control of meat and dairy exports. He also tried to seek out better shipping and insurance deals for New Zealand exporters.

On his return to New Zealand in 1900, Mackenzie re-entered Parliament by winning the Waihemo seat made vacant by the retirement of John McKenzie. In 1902 part of the electorate was incorporated in Waikouaiti, which Mackenzie represented until 1908 when he shifted to Taieri. He was a particularly strenuous advocate of the Otago cause and strove to halt the region's decline relative to the rest of the country. He also managed to find time to serve as mayor of Roslyn (1901--5) and to represent the suburb on the local hospital and charitable aid board. Spare moments between 1900 and 1909 were filled on both the Otago Education Board (on which he had served from 1893 to 1896) and the Otago Boys' and Girls' High Schools Board. He believed that higher education should not entrench privilege but should be made as widely available as

possible, particularly in practical subjects like engineering and agricultural science.

In 1908 Mackenzie - controversially, but not entirely illogically - joined the Liberals. The following year he was given the posts of minister of agriculture, minister of industries and commerce and minister in charge of tourism. The prime minister, Sir Joseph Ward, hoped that appointing a freeholder to cabinet would help stop the drift of farmers away from the Liberal party, and revitalise the old alliance of urban labour, small town businessmen and small farmers. Mackenzie, in turn, hoped to continue the implementation of progressive and liberal policies while heading off an emerging socialist challenge. Although his promotion was resented by many older Liberal members, Mackenzie was an effective minister of agriculture. Herd testing was initiated in 1909, and the useful *Journal of the Department of Agriculture* was launched with his wholehearted support in 1910. He brought Maori land under the scope of the Scenery Preservation Board within the Department of Lands and Survey, and gave active support to the board's activities.

Thomas Mackenzie's move to the Egmont electorate in 1911 lost him much support amongst his colleagues. Nevertheless, when Ward resigned as prime minister following the Liberals' election setback in 1911, Mackenzie was chosen as his successor ahead of the unpopular John Millar. He lacked either the charisma or vision to lift the Liberals out of their lethargy and seemed almost relieved to hand over power to William Massey and the Reform Party in July 1912. He resigned confident that the Liberals' innovations had become too entrenched to be abolished.

Almost immediately Mackenzie was appointed high commissioner for New Zealand in the United Kingdom. The outbreak of war in August 1914 turned a job with a reputation as a sinecure into a challenge demanding energy and supreme diplomatic skills. Mackenzie was particularly concerned with the treatment of New Zealand soldiers, a concern made more poignant when his own son, Clutha, was seriously wounded and blinded during the Gallipoli campaign. He was sympathetic to Ettie Rout's campaign against venereal disease among the troops and served on the Imperial War Graves Commission and the royal commission into the Dardanelles campaign.

Mackenzie was rewarded for his efforts by being knighted in 1916 and in 1920 became the first New Zealander to be appointed a GCMG. He was also made a Grand Officer of the Crown of Belgium and was granted an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of Edinburgh. The knighthood opened doors in British high society and the dandyish Mackenzie, with his penchant for well-cut suits, mixed easily in these circles. This no doubt helped him in negotiating shipping for New Zealand produce and in speeding up the sending home of weary New Zealand soldiers. He also served as a delegate at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

Mackenzie returned to New Zealand and was appointed to the Legislative Council in 1921; he was reappointed in 1928. During this time he concentrated on promoting conservation. In 1922 he tried to add the pukeko and paradise duck to the protected list and acted as sponsor for Captain Val Sanderson in establishing the New Zealand Native Bird Protection Society (which became the Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand). He also supported his son Clutha in developing the Jubilee Institute for the Blind. His final years were sad, with his daughter Mary dying in Fiji in 1925, and his wife, Ida, dying in 1926 on a visit to Britain. He died of heart failure at Dunedin on 4 February 1930.

Thomas Mackenzie was a lively if somewhat enigmatic politician and a competent and caring diplomat. His later political career exemplifies some of the forces at work in the transition from Liberal to Reform. He rose to be prime minister almost by accident, and his greatest contribution to New Zealand lay in his stout support of the cause of conservation.

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