



John James Meikle was born in Linlithgow, Scotland, probably in 1844 or 1845, the son of John Meikle, a general labourer, and his wife, Jannet Jamieson. Nothing is known of Meikle's early life. In

October 1869 he and other members of his family emigrated to Otago, New Zealand, on the *Christian McAusland*, arriving in January 1870. He married Elizabeth Barras at Dunedin on 10 January 1871; they had no children before her death twelve months later. On 1 April 1873, Meikle married Jane Lewis at Dunedin; they were to have ten children, and Jane Meikle had a son, Arthur, from a previous liaison.

Meikle was initially engaged in various jobs in Dunedin, including a period as a policeman. In 1881 he acquired a farm of 800 acres at Tuturau, in eastern Southland, on which he ran 800 sheep and a few cattle and did some cropping. Adjacent to Meikle's property was the extensive Islay station, owned by the New Zealand Mortgage and Investment Association. Disputes over boundaries led to Meikle being charged, in October 1884, with assaulting Alexander McAuley, an employee of the association; he was sentenced in 1885 to one month with hard labour. Following his release, he and McAuley unsuccessfully charged each other with perjury, and in 1887 Meikle petitioned for an acquittal and payment of compensation, without result.

Early in 1887 the association became concerned about losses of sheep, apparently through theft, and instructed its manager to find out what was happening to the stock. He employed a shepherd named William Lambert to act as a detective. Lambert was paid £1 a week and was promised a reward of £50 if he could uncover evidence which would lead to the conviction of the culprit. Suspicion was cast on Meikle, and as a result of information supplied by Lambert, a constable at Wyndham carried out a raid on Meikle's farm. After two sheepskins bearing the association's brand were found, Meikle was arrested and charged with sheepstealing. A charge against his stepson, Arthur, was dropped.

Meikle's trial began in the Supreme Court in Invercargill on 16 December 1887. The Crown case rested mainly on the uncorroborated evidence of Lambert, who the defence claimed had a vested interest in securing a conviction because of the reward. Prevented by the law of evidence from testifying in his own defence, Meikle was found guilty, in spite of calling Sir Robert Stout as a character witness. He was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude in Lyttelton prison, but on the grounds of good conduct was given two years' remission and released in November 1892. He immediately returned to Southland to begin a campaign to clear his name, and for three years scoured the countryside for evidence. In 1895 a charge of perjury was laid against Lambert; and although a change in the law since 1887 allowed him to give evidence in his own defence, he was convicted and sent to prison for four years.

Meikle now attempted to have his name cleared and to obtain compensation. He had lost his farm, his marriage and practically everything he possessed, and had spent something like £5,000 in his battle for justice. Accordingly, in 1895 he petitioned Parliament for £10,000 compensation for wrongful conviction and imprisonment. The case was debated at length in the House of Representatives, and in 1897 compensation of £500 was paid to him. Meikle accepted it with some reluctance, after signing a document waiving all further claims. Nevertheless, he and others continued the campaign, and the publication of several pamphlets outlining the injustices he had suffered aroused the public conscience. So persistently did Meikle and his supporters urge his claims on Parliament that a commission consisting of two judges of the Supreme Court was appointed to investigate the case.

The commission took a bleak view of Meikle's character: he prevaricated on the matter of his 'illicit relations' with a young woman, Emily Mills, and evidence was produced that the police had earlier suspected Meikle of assisting an abortion and of attempted rape. He had also threatened one of the Crown's witnesses. The commission recommended an acquittal for Meikle, but did so in a half-hearted way and without the slightest touch of compassion. A special act of Parliament was required to bring into effect the recommendation. The Meikle Acquittal Act was passed in 1908, and although it cleared his name it failed to award monetary compensation.

Denied satisfaction in New Zealand, Meikle went abroad in 1912 to publicise his case. He toured Britain and Europe lecturing on the evils of the New Zealand system of justice and extended his

activities to the United States. The tour brought him little joy and he returned to New Zealand. Every time there was a change of government Meikle renewed his claims for retrospective compensation, but always without success. Meikle's second wife, Jane, died at Maitua in December 1920, and on 15 January 1921 Meikle married Emily Mills at Auckland; the first of their five children had been born in 1901. When Meikle died aged 94 on 25 November 1937 at Dunedin, a bitter and broken man, the government had before it an impassioned plea for a review of his case. His death put an end to one of the most remarkable cases in New Zealand legal history. Emily Meikle died in 1943.

John Meikle is buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand [[www.cemeteries.org.nz](http://www.cemeteries.org.nz)]  
from information in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*