



Reid, Donald 1833 - 1919
Farmer, politician, businessman

Donald Reid was born on 16 July 1833 at Newton farm, Pitcastle, in the Strath Tay district of Perthshire, Scotland, the third son of Donald Reid, a farmer, and his wife, Margaret McGregor. He was educated at a local school, the Burns' Academy in Edinburgh and then an endowed school in Strath Tay. Donald Reid's father died in 1844, while the family was in Edinburgh. Donald returned to Strath Tay to live with an uncle, who died in 1848. By then Margaret Reid had remarried, and she and her new husband, John Dalton, decided to emigrate to Otago, New Zealand, with her three sons.

The Reid family reached Port Chalmers on the *Mary* on 11 April 1849 and settled in Dunedin. Donald's oldest brother, Charles, became a leading figure in financial circles, managing the Dunedin-based Standard Fire and Marine Insurance Company of New Zealand in the 1880s. His other brother, Hugh, became a farmer at Herbert in North Otago. Donald almost immediately found employment as a labourer on W. H. Valpy's farm at Forbury, South Dunedin. He also worked on farms on the Taieri Plain, but his aspiration was to become a farmer himself. In 1850 he leased land at Caversham, and in 1852, not yet 20 years of age, he purchased a block there; by 1854 he had 200 acres. He also did some contract cartage work, and grazed cattle on leased land on the Taieri. Reid married Frances Barr near Dunedin on 1 December 1854; they were to have at least four sons and four daughters. Frances Reid died on 4 November 1868, and on 18 March 1874 at Dunedin Reid married Sarah Price, a widow with two sons; they were to have one daughter.

In 1856 Donald Reid made the first purchase in North Taieri of the land which he was to develop and add to over the next three decades to form Salisbury estate. This was to be Reid's home for 56 years, and it was here that he first made his mark as a successful settler. He was a skilful and progressive farmer, and turned the estate into a model of contemporary mixed farming. At first the main activity was growing wheat and oats as commercial crops, and grain farming continued to be important on the fertile flat land around the homestead. Reid is reputed to have been the first Taieri farmer to use steam power for harvesting. By the mid 1860s Reid was grazing sheep and cattle on sown pasture.

In 1882 Reid owned freehold property valued at £28,000. He had also made money by running a cartage business to and from the goldfields in the 1860s, and was now a wealthy man. Some of the estate was in tenant farms. The day-to-day business was left to his managers, although Reid and his family continued to live at Salisbury. At the time of his death in 1919 the estate comprised 6,300 acres freehold, over 2,000 acres of which was on the fertile Taieri Plain. Reid also held a large area of leased hill country, much of which had been developed into pasture by burning off the tussock, over-sowing, fencing and grazing.

Like many prominent landowners Reid became involved in politics. He was a Taieri member of the Otago Provincial Council from 1863 until the demise of provincial government in 1876. As provincial secretary and treasurer he briefly headed the provincial executive in 1868, and was a leading figure on executives (1869--72 and 1874--76). He contested the superintendency in 1871 but was defeated by James Macandrew. Reid was a sound administrator. His particular interest was in land settlement policy, and he was closely associated with the factions in provincial politics which sought closer settlement, opposed the alienation of agricultural land to pastoralists and estate owners, and were in favour of legislation which made settlement easier for those with little capital. His views, and his position in the council, meant that he came to be seen as a political champion of land seekers, farmers and other small settlers.

In 1872 Reid was instrumental in having new land regulations passed which assisted settlers onto Crown land. One feature of the regulations was the deferred payment settlement system, under which settlers took up land on terms which required only a small deposit and certain improvements; further payments were deferred until the settlers were better established.

In 1866 Reid became a member of the House of Representatives for the Taieri electorate, which he represented until 1869, and again from 1871 to 1878. He was briefly minister for public works in the Stafford administration of 1872, and in 1877 he was secretary for Crown lands and minister for immigration in the Atkinson government. Reid's main contribution as a parliamentarian was to land policy. As in provincial politics, he advocated closer land settlement. In 1877 he supervised the drafting of the first major consolidation of land laws in the colony, a measure necessitated by the abolition of provincial government. The Atkinson government was defeated prior to the passage of Reid's bill, which was subsequently taken up and passed by the Grey administration.

In 1878 Reid retired from political life. He was never an enthusiastic politician, the provincial form of government which he had defended had been abolished, and he was unsympathetic to the views (and rhetoric) of the new land reformers such as George Grey and Robert Stout. Reid had his successes in political life, and was a respected parliamentarian, although his stubbornness and individualism did not fit well with the compromises required for political leadership. Apart from a period on the Otago Harbour Board, he took little further part in public life.

On leaving politics Reid began a new career in commerce. In September 1878 he founded Donald Reid and Company, a stock and station agency, and began operations from a store and office building in Lower High Street, Dunedin. Reid began the business as a way to provide greater security for his large family, having decided that the medium-term outlook for farming was poor. His links with the rural sector and his reputation with farming settlers made the stock and station business an obvious choice.

Donald Reid and Company was soon carrying out all the activities of a stock and station agent: selling stock, wool and grain on commission; advancing money; and selling farm supplies. The business grew rapidly and the company became well established as a provincial firm. Reid's aspiration that it provide employment and security for his family was realised: four sons, two stepsons and two sons-in-law were employed in the firm before the First World War.

Donald Reid and Company became a private joint stock company in 1900. Reid continued as managing director and chairman until 1918 when he retired, in ill health. He was then 86 years of age. He was a prudent businessman. Losses in the depression of the early 1880s made him cautious, and he was content to operate within Otago and keep within the general boundaries of the stock and station agency business. He relied heavily on his own judgement and personal supervision on the financial side. None the less, he left the firm he founded in a very satisfactory position. More than 100 years after its establishment, it continued to trade as Donald Reid Otago Farmers Limited.

Donald Reid was a short, thickset man, square-jawed and full-bearded. Inclined to be taciturn, when he spoke it was with a broad Scots accent, and what he had to say was usually blunt and to the point. Reid was diligent, principled and stubborn to a fault. He was admired for his honesty, integrity and probity.

On 7 February 1919 Reid died at the home at Abbotsford, south of Dunedin, to which he had moved in 1912 when Salisbury estate was sold. Sarah Reid had died in 1905. In his later years Reid was regarded as the epitome of all that was best about the early settlers of Otago, and he increasingly identified himself with them. He was an early president of the Otago Early Settlers' Association, from 1900 until his death.

Donald Reid was a successful farmer, estate owner, politician and businessman. Throughout his long and varied career he identified closely with the farming settlers, and gave practical expression to his belief that the ownership of 'a little bit of land of their own' was a common human aspiration. Reid played a significant role in ensuring that European settlement in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Otago would be by small holders on freehold farms.

JOHN H. ANGUS

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