



James McLaren Ritchie had a simple business philosophy: if the principle is right the profit will follow. It did, and he led the National Mortgage and Agency Company of New Zealand (NMA) to top ranking as a stock and station company.

He was born at Dunedin on 23 November 1907 to Russell Ian Ritchie, a physician, and his wife, Lucy Bayly Rattray. Dr Ritchie, a member of one of Dunedin's leading families, sent his son to the Anglican Waihi School, South Canterbury, and Christ's College. Jim Ritchie left school to join the State Forest Service but a legacy provided funds for him to study at the University of Cambridge. In 1930 he graduated BA and gained a diploma of agriculture. He was equally proud of having rowed with the Lady Margaret Boat Club.

In December 1930 Ritchie joined NMA, the firm his grandfather, John Macfarlane Ritchie, had helped found and which was now headed by his uncle, G. R. Ritchie. Neither his connections nor his academic qualifications exempted him from company routine. He started as a junior clerk in the grain and seeds section at Dunedin, then moved to the jute and bag department. Sent to Cheviot in 1936 to become a stock agent, Ritchie learned to draft lambs, auction pigs and sell wool packs and drench. In 1938 he was transferred back to Dunedin as assistant branch manager. Head office was situated on the floor above the branch and his progress was closely monitored.

After working as station clerk at Moeraki station, Ritchie went into the army, but he was discharged in 1944 because of asthma. He became branch manager of NMA at Dunedin; in 1951, when his uncle retired, he moved upstairs to become general manager. Two years later he was appointed managing director.

Ritchie was in charge when the company experienced unprecedented growth between 1955 and 1961. As a result of a remarkable series of mergers (each, he always emphasised, initiated by the other company concerned) NMA expanded to become a company with over 20 branches and more than 100 sub-branches and agencies from Kaitaia to Invercargill. There were no forced redundancies in these takeovers, and Ritchie travelled incessantly, getting to know staff and learning of local problems. Few company heads have been better known to subordinates, and few so liked and respected. All ranks referred to him by his initials and a visit from JMR was always a branch highlight.

Ritchie's next move was to bring control of the company from London to New Zealand in 1969. A new board was appointed and Ritchie became the first New Zealand chairman. He held this post when NMA merged with Wright Stephenson in 1972 to form Wrightson NMA, and also became chairman of Challenge Corporation, of which the new company was a subsidiary.

He served as director of a number of other companies, notably the National Insurance Company of New Zealand, the Trustees Executors and Agency Company of New Zealand, Donaghys Rope and Twine Company, and Mosgiel Woollens. As chairman of National Insurance, Ritchie played a key role in taking over the Standard Insurance Company and its staff after the disastrous crash of 1961.

Active in the Anglican church in Otago, Ritchie was for many years on the Diocesan Trust Board, for eight of them as chairman. He was a member of the St Paul's Cathedral chapter for 30 years and was made a lay canon in 1969. He was a member of the University Grants Committee from 1969 to 1972, and when NMA reached its centenary in 1964 he influenced the board to mark the occasion by giving £75,000 towards the building of University College, a hall of residence at the University of Otago. He later served on the college's council. Ritchie was honorary vice consul for the Netherlands in Dunedin, chaired the Otago branch of the Navy League and served a term as president of the Dunedin Club. He was made a CBE in 1979.

Ritchie had married Nan Henrietta Orbell at Timaru on 6 October 1936. They had no sons, but to Ritchie's delight all three daughters married men of the land. Jim and Nan shared a love of gardening and golf and both played an important part in a planting programme when the Otago Golf Club redeveloped its course at Balmacewen. They also developed a splendid garden at their retirement home in Wanaka. Slim, trim, a keen tennis player, golfer and fisherman, Ritchie loved life and enjoyed company. He was equally relaxed dining with a duke or eating stew in a musterer's hut.

James McLaren Ritchie retired from his last directorship in May 1980, became ill soon afterwards and died of cancer in Dunedin Hospital on 28 August 1981. He was survived by his wife and daughters. After a packed funeral service in his beloved cathedral he was cremated at Dunedin. His ashes were buried in the Ritchie family plot in the Andersons Bay Cemetery.