



**Charles Speight** was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 30 July 1865, the son of James Speight, a debt collector, and his wife, Mary Jane Jenkinson. In 1876 James Speight and two partners, William Dawson, a brewer, and Charles Greenslade, a maltster, established the brewery James Speight and Company. The Speight family lived and worked in central Dunedin, attended the Moray Place Congregational Church and spent holidays at Puruakanui. Red-headed Charles developed a passion for boats and sports, even though his participation was restricted by an extremely bandy leg. After attending Dunedin Normal School he took up a brewing apprenticeship at Speight's under Dawson in 1881.

James Speight died in 1887 and Mary inherited his third of the brewery partnership. That year, Dawson was elected mayor of Dunedin and Charles became acting head brewer. His mother's death in 1896 brought Charles three-eighths of her interest in the firm, and when in 1897 Speight's became a limited liability company with £60,000 share capital, Charles's portion was £9,930. On 17 August 1898 at Dunedin he married Jessie McCulloch Brown; they were to have four sons and a daughter.

As a board member and works manager Charles effectively became head of the brewery. His administration was characterised by a concern for staff welfare and quality of production, and the development of an efficient distribution system throughout Australasia. In 1915 an increase in beer duty tempted many brewers to reduce the strength of their brews, but Speight persuaded them that this would provoke even higher duty. On the introduction of six o'clock closing in 1917 a number of barley growers, fearing a slump in sales, proposed to switch to other crops, but Speight ensured the continuation of supplies by guaranteeing to buy all that they grew. Already the country's biggest brewery, by the late 1890s Speight's was to quadruple sales under his leadership.

An artillery volunteer in his youth, Charles joined the organising committee raising and equipping local contingents for the South African War (1899--1902). During the First World War he organised fund-raising ventures through the Otago Patriotic and General Welfare Association. He was deputy chairman of the Otago Soldiers' and Dependants' Welfare Committee, joined the Red Cross and

supported their Military Convalescent Home, Montecillo. He worked tirelessly for the rehabilitation and welfare of returned soldiers from both wars.

Charles Speight was a founding director of the Waipori Falls Electric Power Company, formed in 1902 to supply Dunedin. In 1909 the Peninsula Ferry Company was incorporated, with Speight as managing director and a 25 per cent shareholder. By having its vessels constructed locally the company engendered a flourishing shipbuilding industry in Dunedin. The Speight family used the ferries frequently to reach their holiday home at fashionable Broad Bay. In 1921 Charles tackled the problem of inadequate coastal shipping by leading other Dunedin manufacturers in forming the Dunedin--Wanganui Shipping Company. Their ship, the *Holmdale*, became known as the 'Mercy Ship' because of its regular consignment of Speight's beer.

In 1923 the continuing threat of prohibition was countered by an amalgamation of New Zealand's largest brewing firms. A joint company was better able to mount a concerted propaganda campaign for continuance and public availability of shares was seen as effective in combating the beer baron image. With the big companies no longer competing, the necessity for the much-criticised tied houses, which were bound to supply only a particular brewer's product, was removed. Speight's, easily New Zealand's largest producer, was essential to the merger. A supporter of the move from the outset, Charles Speight overcame fellow directors' reluctance and on 1 July 1923 New Zealand Breweries was born. Charles Speight was crucial to its foundation and his brewery was its cornerstone. He was a director until his death.

In 1926 he was appointed a CBE for his key role in ensuring the success of Dunedin's 1925--26 New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition. He was vice chairman of the exhibition board and chairman of the finance committee. A brewer to the end, Speight checked malt-floors and fermenters nightly and on Sunday mornings. While walking to work on Sunday 19 February 1928 he suffered a dizzy spell and died of heart failure hours later. He was survived by his wife, Jessie, and five children. Although he had little personal charisma, being reserved in manner and a poor speaker, Charles Speight was highly regarded for his wisdom, energy and administrative skills. As a brewer he led the field; as a public-spirited citizen and unostentatious philanthropist he was respected throughout the community. DNZB