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SIR JOHN MCKENZIE AND THE ORIGINS AND GROWTH
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE 1891-1900.

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the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in History at Massey University

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PREFACE

Although two theses have examined John McKenzie's activities as Minister of Lands in a fairly detailed way, they have virtually ignored his actions as Minister of Agriculture. This one-sided concentration has meant that we know very little about McKenzie's achievements as Minister of Agriculture, even though they were of equal importance in the short term and have proven to be more important in the long term. Agricultural legislation passed by John McKenzie was as creative as his land laws and made up of many more statutes. This proliferation of laws relating to agricultural matters was largely explained by the fact that major problems were covered by separate statutes, whereas McKenzie's Land Acts and W.P. Reeves' labour laws were concentrated in one or two massive acts, which were extraordinarily comprehensive. Nevertheless, the agricultural laws passed by John McKenzie were on a similar scale to his land acts and to the labour legislation of Reeves, in terms of legislative output, legislative energy and powers created for the government. Furthermore, the administration of the Department of Agriculture affected nearly as many people as did the running of the Department of Lands and Survey. Today, much of the agricultural legislation introduced and passed by John McKenzie still has a direct effect on our lives, both in the city and on the farm. Town milk supply continues to be examined by employees of the Department of Agriculture; cowsheds are still regularly inspected by government officials; sheep are dipped within certain time limits, as they were in the 1890's; and slaughtering has been carried out in licensed abattoirs under the supervision of government inspectors ever since 1900. On the other hand, lease in perpetuity is now obsolete and only of interest in school text books and learned journals. Obviously, then, a study of John McKenzie's actions as Minister

of Agriculture is long overdue. The urgent need for such an investigation and the stringent word limits placed upon the exercise, has meant that the thesis is almost exclusively concerned with John McKenzie as Minister of Agriculture. It only looks at his work as Minister of Lands in a general way in an attempt to explain the formulation of his agricultural policies and the development of his distinctive ministerial style.

The thesis concentrates on the period 1891-1900, when John McKenzie held ministerial office, but research was begun from around 1878 when the first Sheep Act to be passed by the central government was introduced. This work on earlier developments has proven to be valuable, for it has clearly shown that John McKenzie was not an innovator but rather a consolidator. The thesis also moves into some tentative speculation after 1900, in an attempt to assess the political implications of John McKenzie's agricultural policies.

It must be made clear that the nature of this research exercise has been considerably shaped by the sources used, or more correctly by the lack of sources available. Investigation was originally carried out into the activities of the agricultural inspectorate, but it was soon discovered that a virtual archival vacuum existed for the 1890's, as there are no known files of the early years of the Department of Agriculture in existence. A few files do survive for the 1880's, and these have been incorporated to indicate the lines of development before the department was set up in 1892. To make matters worse, the Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture were almost totally made up of technical detail. There was no clearly defined bureaucratic philosophy expressed in them as there was in Tregear's Department of Labour reports and virtually no account of administrative structures and functions. So research was literally forced to move more in the direction of the activities and personality of the first

Minister of Agriculture, John McKenzie himself.

Here further problems were encountered. No personal collection of papers or manuscripts related to John McKenzie survive. An open letter to the Otago Daily Times requesting information, drew a reply which revealed that McKenzie's house at Heathfield, including his library, was burnt down in 1967 and almost totally destroyed. Furthermore, John McKenzie did not seem to write many letters that have been preserved. There is not one piece of correspondence to or from him in the Ballance collection of over 700 letters, only two letters concerning technical details of McKenzie's mortgage are found in the massive Robert Stout collection of letters and there are a meagre two letters written to James Wilson of Bulls, in 1892, regarding a visit there and the question of the flax bonus, in the Fisher Family Papers. It is not really surprising, therefore, that researchers have largely ignored this extremely important political figure and have concentrated on his actions as Minister of Lands rather than as John McKenzie the man.

Nevertheless, information can be extrapolated from other places. The Parliamentary Debates have revealed where pressures for change came from and what various interest groups thought about McKenzie's policies, while providing a considerable amount of administrative detail through answers given to questions asked in the House. They also contain much information on McKenzie's official attitudes and to a lesser extent his personal views and changes in them, over the years. Other official publications like Bills Thrown Out and New Zealand Statutes contain details of legislative and administrative precedent and practice. Year books have provided some information on administrative structures and functions, as have the Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives and the Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture. The Appendices and Reports have also brought to

light a little information on the implementation of laws. "Letters from the Men of Mark" written to William Pember Reeves, held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, suggested that John McKenzie's relationship to Seddon, Ward and Reeves was more important and complex than has formerly been supposed. An interview with John McKenzie's niece, Mrs. H.M.M. Davie, and a working through of his will, helped to fill out bibliographical detail. Newspaper editorials and cartoons gave an indication of the way in which John McKenzie, the man, the politician and the administrator, was viewed by the public. Newspapers also provided some evidence on the reception of his agricultural policies, but time was not available for the mammoth task of properly working over newspaper responses to the implementation of McKenzie's agricultural legislation; a task made even more difficult by the lack of surviving small town papers for the 1890's and the general disinterest of city based papers in such essentially rural matters which lacked any great news value. Then an attempt was made to put together the jig-saw puzzle with its many missing pieces.

Finally, it must be made clear that as this is very much a pioneer piece of research, as well as being a mini-thesis, with severe time and word limits, it poses more questions than it answers. The only claim made is that it is a pioneer examination, with the many inadequacies of such 'new' research, of the other side of John McKenzie the politician, legislator/administrator, that is as Minister of Agriculture rather than as Minister of Lands. Any attempt to assess the larger political and administrative implications of his actions as Minister of Agriculture must only be treated as suggestion, not as well tested fact. But surely the job of the historical researcher is to open up new avenues of research, to ask questions and present problems for others to solve, thereby increasing our knowledge of the past, rather than neatly sealing up a topic and stamping it closed.

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Abbreviations

AJHR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives
'Letters from Men of Mark'	Letters from Men of Mark in New Zealand to the Hon. W.P. Reeves, British Library of Political and Economical Science, London School of Economics.
ODT	Otago Daily Times
PD	New Zealand Parliamentary Debates
Year Book	Official New Zealand Year Book

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is essentially concerned with the examination of an exceptional minister in action; a man who wanted to keep power to himself and who, because of his nationwide identity, achieved through his activities as Minister of Lands, would have found it impossible to have even attempted to hide behind a complex of departmental machinery. The paternalistic, quasi-feudal ministerial style of John McKenzie stood in marked contrast to the accepted pattern of political life in the 1890's which saw a massive transfer of power to bureaucratic processes. In view of this prebureaucratic ministerial style it was not surprising that John McKenzie considerably shaped administrative and legislative developments related to agriculture up till his retirement in 1900. Yet even he was only able to slow down the transfer of real power and control of organisational detail to the bureaucracy; that is from the man to the institution itself. After his retirement the considerable powers and responsibilities that he had created for the Minister himself were taken over by the bureaucratic machine in the form of the Department of Agriculture. This development was accompanied by extremely rapid administrative growth and a considerable rise in the importance and power of the Under-secretary. Apart from anything else the huge volume of paper work that McKenzie brought upon the Minister meant that the continuation of such a highly personalised style would be impossible.

The argument is developed in three chapters. The first chapter provides a brief biography of John McKenzie within the framework of the 'man' and the 'myth'. It attempts to show that John McKenzie's personal characteristics interacted with forces outside his control in leading him to adopt a distinctive ministerial style. Some new evidence on the part played by John McKenzie within the Liberal ministry has



Sir John McKenzie. Minister of Lands and Agriculture
1891 - 1899. Alexander Turnbull Library.

been introduced in an attempt to show that his political importance was greater than has formerly been supposed. It appears that he was a kind of rural advocate and an exceptionally loyal party man who strongly supported Seddon and that his name stood as a symbol of integrity, at a time when the Liberals were badly in need of such a symbolic counter to opposition accusations of corruption. The chapter concludes by suggesting that John McKenzie took the responsibilities of the portfolio of agriculture as seriously as those of lands, because he realised that land settlement was not enough in itself. National prosperity could only come from keeping up with world demands and competition through the stricter regulation and standardisation of production and marketing practices and an increasing use of scientific farming methods.

The second chapter makes up the bulk of the thesis as it is concerned with an examination of John McKenzie's ministerial style as such. Particular emphasis is placed on the extremely personalised nature of this ministerial style, and the way in which he consolidated earlier laws, centralised the operations of administration and increased the comprehensiveness and coerciveness of regulations. The chapter ends by comparing administrative growth under John McKenzie's tutelage to that immediately following his retirement. A definite pattern seems to emerge: namely that extremely rapid departmental growth and changes of function came immediately after John McKenzie's retirement. This suggests that John Douglas Ritchie may have played the role of a kind of unsung Tregear within the agricultural sector, and that the processes set in motion by John McKenzie could not be contained by a minister lacking his quasi-charismatic political appeal and ability to handle masses of administrative detail. As long as John McKenzie was in command he attempted to shape part of the nation's destiny in his own image and did not allow a Tregear or a Hogben to remake New Zealand's agricultural structures

and functions behind closed doors.

From here the thesis moves outside its basic legislative/administrative orientation in an attempt to set the Minister of Agriculture's actions in political perspective. This third chapter suggests that John McKenzie was working within a kind of concensus of agricultural producers. The existence of such a concensual grouping meant that agricultural regulations were treated as concensus rather than crisis issues, while ideological differences within this context were almost totally absent. As a result cross-voting in the House on agricultural bills was relatively common and divisions tended to centre around the manoeuvres of local and more colony-wide commercial interest groups, rather than around political parties. John McKenzie then was not only able to pass so many agricultural laws without alienating great numbers of rural voters because of his quasi-charismatic qualities and his distinctive ministerial style, but because he was able to associate himself with the interests of this concensual group and to act upon their demands.

In conclusion two major suggestions are made. The first is that John McKenzie's ministerial actions in the field of agricultural policy formulation and legislative and administrative development were in actuality nearly as important as his activities carried out under the portfolio of lands. Secondly, the suggestion is offered for future researchers to refute, confirm or more probably qualify, that John McKenzie was a kind of rural vote magnet within the Liberal party and that the agricultural policies of his successors, T.Y. Duncan and R. McNab - men who lacked his symbolic rural farmer association, intense personal involvement in the portfolio of agriculture and apparently high-minded concern for improved production practices - possibly came to take the votes of many rural dwellers away from the Liberal party. In other words, the general movement of farmers away from the Liberals was not

simply related to the leasehold/freehold and roads and bridges issues, but also concerned other government practices which directly affected the day to day life of the farmer. Rabbit destruction and cow shed inspection, as well as the personality and approach of the Minister himself, were other factors which must be taken into consideration if we are to understand the increasing organisation and relevance of the opposition of agricultural producers to the Liberal government that occurred between 1900 and 1912.

John McKenzie's years as Minister of Agriculture saw important and creative legislative and administrative developments, which were on a similar scale to his more well known land laws or the Labour acts of W.P. Reeves. Yet his ministerial style was distinctly pre-bureaucratic at a time when massive bureaucratic growth seems to have been considered as a general solution for the nation's political, administrative, economic and even social problems.
