

Story: Mackenzie, Clutha Nantes

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Mackenzie, Clutha Nantes

1895–1966

Farm worker, soldier, editor, worker for the blind

This biography, written by Penelope Hansen, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography in 1998. It was updated in February, 2006.

Clutha Nantes Mackenzie was born on 11 February 1895 at Balclutha, the seventh and youngest child of [Thomas Noble Mackenzie](#), an MP and businessman, and his wife, Ida Henrietta Nantes. For a few months in 1912 Thomas was prime minister of New Zealand, and from 1912 to 1920 he was the country's high commissioner in London.

Clutha was educated at Mornington School, Otago Boys' High School and Waitaki Boys' High School. He was always more interested in the outdoors, however, and as a youth spent as much time as possible on two vessels that frequented the southern waters of New Zealand: the lighthouse steamer *Hinemoa* and the defence vessel *Lady Roberts*. He wanted to join the navy, but instead went to the Weraroa Experimental Farm near Levin as its first agricultural cadet, and later transferred to the Ruakura

Farm of Instruction. He took a job on a farm before working for 10 weeks during the 1913 waterfront strike, loading ships in Wellington with other members of the farming community. He was then employed on a hill country sheep farm.

At the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted with enthusiasm and went with the Wellington Mounted Rifles Regiment to Egypt. From there he was sent to Gallipoli, and in the ferocious battle for Chunuk Bair, in August 1915, he lost his sight when a shell fired from a British man-of-war fell short. Sent to England with other blinded soldiers for rehabilitation, Mackenzie was taken under the wing of Sir Arthur Pearson who, blind himself, had founded St Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors. The overriding philosophy there was one of independence and self-help and Clutha Mackenzie responded with vigour. By 1916 he was editing a lively magazine for the troops, *Chronicles of the NZEF*. Presumably he dictated his contributions to a typist and edited submitted articles with the assistance of a reader.

At St Dunstan's he met Doris Agnes Sawyer, an English volunteer worker. On his way back to New Zealand in HMS *New Zealand* in early 1919, he cabled Doris from Bombay proposing marriage. She accepted, and the couple were married in Auckland on 2 October 1919. In the meantime Clutha had edited *The history of HMS New Zealand* for the New Zealand Navy League.

Never one to relax, in November 1919 he stood unsuccessfully as the Reform Party candidate for Auckland East. In 1921 he won the seat at a by-election but lost it in 1922 to the Labour Party candidate, [John A. Lee](#). He published an account of his experiences as a soldier, *The tales of a trooper*, in 1921.

In 1923 Mackenzie was appointed director of the Jubilee Institute for the Blind in Parnell, Auckland. The appointment was not without controversy: some said he was assisted by the political influence of his family. He was in charge of the institute during a period of enormous growth. The death of Sir Arthur Pearson in 1921 had prompted a call to raise money for a memorial. Clutha Mackenzie agreed to undertake this, provided the money be used in New Zealand rather than 70 per cent being sent to Britain as originally proposed. He personally covered 700 miles on horseback to raise money for the Sir Arthur Pearson Memorial Fund which was to be used specifically for the welfare of blind people. He also raised funds for a building project which were matched pound for pound by the government. This project resulted in workshops in George Street and in 1926 a new men's hostel, later known as Pearson House, in Titoki Street.

Mackenzie was soon involved in further fundraising. In 1927 he founded the institute band and in partnership with the conductor, George Bowes, organised highly successful tours of the country. The band also played at various functions in Auckland. It performed for over 30 years and raised thousands of pounds for the institute.

The institute provided training and work for the blind, but Mackenzie had long sought greater government assistance to enable blind people to live independent lives. In 1924 he had the satisfaction of seeing legislation passed that protected blind people from any reduction in their pensions if their earnings increased. He made sure that goods produced in the Parnell workshops were of a high enough quality to be commercially competitive. He used his knowledge of the business world and his influential acquaintances to ensure that the institute was run as efficiently as possible. To generations of Aucklanders the craft shop in Parnell Road was a regular shopping destination.

But all was not perfect. The dictatorial style that seemed to make Clutha Mackenzie's fundraising efforts so successful was often resented in the day-to-day running of the institute. He and his family lived on the premises in Titoki Street and he was a constant presence in daily life. The 'inmates' – as they were called in the minutes of the era – were fined for breaches of discipline. These usually involved young men who had been skylarking, swearing or drinking too much. Marriages between inmates or with outsiders had to be approved by the board of trustees, and Mackenzie seems to have had the final say on these and numerous other matters.

In 1932 Morton Aldis, who was secretary to the trustees from 1922 to 1926, published a booklet, *Betrayal of the blind*, in which he set out to discredit the management of the institute. Aldis claimed that Clutha Mackenzie had become 'absolute master' there and that his influence and power over the trustees meant Aldis's voice and that of the blind inhabitants was never heard. There seems to have been little public support for Aldis's claims, and he eventually gave up his campaign.

In 1935 Clutha Mackenzie was knighted for his services to the blind. However, in July 1938 in the Auckland Supreme Court he faced 10 charges of indecent assault on eight males from the institute. The offences were alleged to have taken place between September 1933 and February 1938. In spite of the judge's summing up, which took the accusation very seriously, the case was thrown out by the grand jury.

Mackenzie left the institute that year and from then on concentrated on international forums for the blind and on the development of an international Braille system. From 1940 to 1942 he undertook a coast-to-coast lecture tour of the United States, raising funds for St Dunstan's. Over the following six years he was based in India where he was attached to the Indian Medical Service and in charge of the country's St Dunstan's Training Centre for War Blinded. In 1947 he was awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind Gold Medal for public service in India. In the same year he undertook missions for the governments of China and Malaya to advise on blind welfare.

His family had meanwhile stayed in New Zealand and in 1949 his wife joined him in England. Mackenzie was then employed by UNESCO in Paris for two years working on a universal Braille system. This work resulted in the 1954 publication *World Braille usage*. From 1952 to 1964 Mackenzie chaired the World Braille Council, and during the 1950s he served on numerous missions to east African and Asian countries.

Confronted with this list of activities, it is difficult to remember that Mackenzie had been blind since the age of 20. After his retirement in 1958 he and Doris settled at Homai, near Auckland, on a 70-acre property they had bought in 1927. Clutha Mackenzie died in Auckland on 30 March 1966, survived by his wife, three daughters and two sons. His work had been pivotal in the development of the Blind Institute in the 1920s and 1930s and in the development of a universal Braille system. His enduring legacy to New Zealanders is the high profile he demanded and achieved for the blind.

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