

STATE PURCHASES OF LARGE ESTATES IN CANTERBURY



[From the Alexander Turnbull Library photographic collection.

John McKenzie, whose name will always be linked with the Cheviot purchase and the breaking up of the large estates. From his boyhood in the Highlands he was passionately opposed to anyone holding land in large blocks.

resumed in Canterbury in 1909, when the Culverden estate was taken over after prolonged negotiations and court proceedings.

In the next few years buying was largely confined to South Canterbury and more and more attention was devoted to pastoral land in the foothills. Some 26,800 acres, part freehold and leasehold, of the Tripp estate were acquired in 1910; Sherwood Downs of 57,600 acres, again part freehold and leasehold, was bought in 1912, some 12,700 acres of Four Peaks the same year, and in 1913 Mt. Nessing of 34,800 acres and Ashhurst of 25,000 acres. Besides these there were several smaller agricultural properties, including Allanholme, Douglas, Timaunga, Claremont, Bourndale, Tara, and Landsdown. The changing circumstances in which the land was purchased were shown by the fact that the Government paid about £3 an acre for the Cheviot estate in 1893 and was compelled to pay £19 an acre for the Douglas estate at Waihao Downs in 1911. There would not be so much difference in the quality of the land.

Another striking trend, the shift in demand from agricultural to pastoral properties, was noted by the Land Purchase Inspector in 1912. He declared: "The invariable reason given by owners for seeking to dispose of their properties is the ever-increasing difficulty of obtaining adequate labour. While there is a scarcity of applicants for agricultural lands, the reverse is the case for grazing. As, for instance, for the Four Peaks settlement of an area of 12,692 acres subdivided into 8 sections there were 393 applicants, while for the Timaunga settlement of 5957 acres, mainly agricultural land of good quality, there were only 30. Both are in South Canterbury and both were offered the same day."

Up to 1914 the Government had purchased 369,000 acres in Canterbury,

excluding Cheviot, which shows how much the Canterbury scene was transformed and how important were the social effects.

There was some apprehension that the high price of land would prevent those of limited means from acquiring it at all, and occasionally it was alleged that large areas were still being bought up by the wealthy. In 1911 there were still 22 estates made up of rural land with an unimproved value of £50,000 or more, but this was probably a big reduction compared with a decade earlier.

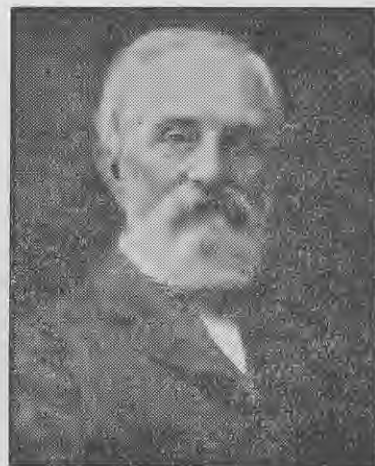
The Canterbury witnesses before the 1905 land tenure commission nearly all declared that they had made little use of the Advances for Settlers Department, and though it lent more later it did not seem to play a significant role in Canterbury farming up to 1914. With land values rising investment in farm mortgages was fairly secure and often fairly low deposits were required. For the farms sold off from Glenmark it was only 10 per cent.

STABLE 1900's

In retrospect the years between 1900 and 1914 seem unruffled and tranquil in every way, and even at the time it must have seemed as if a period of stability had arrived that would go on and on. Technical changes were few, changes in methods were equally few, and perhaps farmers were inclined to grow a little complacent. However, with steadily rising prices there was no great need for them to worry, and few of them did. The frozen-meat trade had long since got over its teething troubles, and the raising of meat for export had become the mainstay of Canterbury farming. The rise in overseas prices was by no means spectacular, and was interrupted at times, as in 1908-09, but the setbacks were not severe enough to disturb anyone.



C. H. Ensor, one of the Canterbury men who played an important part in the evolution of the Corriedale breed of sheep. He was a prominent member of the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Association.



[From the Alexander Turnbull Library photographic collection.

Sir John Hall, who was opposed to the compulsory acquisition of land by the Crown, but who knew that closer settlement must take place. He had a long association with national politics and was one of Canterbury's most progressive runholders.

As usual, wool prices fluctuated more than others and did not begin to progress steadily upward until 1910. Between 1900 and 1909 prices for half-bred wool ranged from 7½d. to 13d., but picked up to 15d. in 1911 and 1912. The rising wool prices brought about a demand for the process of subdivision to be extended to the high-country runs. Before the leases fell due in 1912 the Government appointed two commissions to examine the practicability of subdividing the high-country runs in the Mackenzie Country and Ashburton. One was the usual statutory commission consisting of two officers of the Department of Lands and Survey and a member of the Land Board; the other consisted of three men with experience in the high country.

The statutory commission in its report emphasised the danger of separating summer and winter country and also the need for the runholder to have sufficient resources to tide him over periods of heavy losses and low prices. The commission recommended that of 18 runs 8 might be divided in 2 and 2 into 3, making 30 in all. The second commission submitted two reports, one suggesting that 18 runs be divided into 25 and the second 38. The Mackenzie Country runs were eventually offered in 27 pastoral runs and 5 small grazing runs.

Opposition to Meat Grading

If the frozen-meat trade was the mainstay of Canterbury farming, it did not mean that meat producers were wholly satisfied with their lot. Britain was able to take all the meat offered, but in 1908 and 1909 the rise in prices slackened off and shipments of New Zealand produce always seemed to arrive on the London market when supplies were plentiful and cool stores