

JOHN AND WALTER F. MACKENZIE

ACCLAIMED WIGANITE BROTHERS HALF A WORLD AWAY

By Richard de Grijis (Sydney, Australia)



The Mackenzie brothers. (left) John Mackenzie. *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1896, p. 3. (right) Walter F. Mackenzie. *The Bulletin*, 8 April 1882, p. 1.

Thursday 9 October 1862. The Select Committee tasked with considering the New South Wales Coal Fields Regulation Bill convened for a third day, calling as its first witness Wigan-born John Mackenzie (1833–1916):

*I am a mining engineer and colliery viewer. ... I served my time to the late Wm. Peace, Esq., ..., manager of collieries belonging to the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, one of the most extensive in Lancashire. I served five years, and was there for more than two years as a paid assistant. Afterwards I was in business ... on my own account for between four and five years. ... In Wigan, Lancashire.*¹

John was a grandson of Kenneth Mackenzie, one of the largest colliery proprietors in Lancashire. And so, naturally, at the age of fifteen he was apprenticed to William Peace, one of the leading mining engineers in England. Following the successful completion of his training, he used his time as resident engineer—still under Peace's guidance—to gain practical experience, reporting on coal and iron properties. Mackenzie

quickly gained an excellent reputation as a mining engineer and surveyor, eagerly taking on well-paying apprentices of his own.²

However, by 1861 his deteriorating health prompted his doctors to recommend him to relocate to Australia. In a glowing account published on the occasion of John Mackenzie's retirement in 1896, the *Newcastle Morning Herald* provided a vivid sketch of John Mackenzie's precarious constitution at the time of his arrival in Australia:

*When he left England in December, 1861, Mr. [John] Mackenzie was supposed to be dying of consumption [tuberculosis]. Many eminent doctors even predicted that he would not survive the voyage. His brother (the late Dr. W[alter] F[awkes] Mackenzie [1835–1886], who came out with him in the *Star of India* as surgeon to the ship) considered, however, that a sea voyage might improve his condition. This it did.*³

The Mackenzie brothers left Liverpool on the *Star of India* on 23 December 1861, bound for Melbourne. The White Star line's newest vessel eventually arrived at her destination on 17 March 1862, carrying 150 passengers and a full load of cargo:

*The magnificent packet ship "Star of India" is quite new, having made only one voyage from St. John's to Liverpool, on which occasion she proved herself to be a very fast and comfortable ship. ... she combines most of the improvements required in first-class passenger ships. Her saloons are roomy and handsomely furnished, ... Her accommodations for second cabin, intermediate, and steerage passengers are very superior.*⁴

Despite their tentative start to a new life in the Antipodes, both Mackenzie brothers went on to excel. Shortly after their arrival, John reacquainted himself with James B. Winship, an old friend and colliery manager from his days under William Peace. Winship had meanwhile been appointed colliery manager for the Australian Agricultural Company (the 'A. A. Company'), which provided a useful avenue for John Mackenzie to establish himself professionally.

Hence, in February 1863, he was appointed Examiner of Coalfields for the Illawarra region, the 'Southern Coal Fields', at an annual salary of £400. Following a brief intermission as a private minerals speculator, in 1872 John Mackenzie was made Examiner of Coalfields and Keeper of Mining Records for New South Wales, an influential position he held until his retirement. His energy and professional aptitude fostered the colony's pre-eminent role in the global coal trade:

*New South Wales, he says, can now, without any exaggeration, claim to be in possession of the richest, most accessible, and most extensive coalfields in the Southern hemisphere. With such elements of wealth and greatness, the colony, in his opinion, possesses the essentials of national prosperity. Its bituminous, semi-bituminous, splint, and cannel coals are said to be equal in thickness and quality to any found in other parts of the world; and there are said to be several deposits of Boghead mineral or petroleum oil cannel coal equal and some superior to any found in Scotland, England, or elsewhere.*⁵

Meanwhile, Walter Mackenzie's career developed in parallel with that of his older brother. A member of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh and London, upon his arrival in New South Wales he established a large and lucrative family practice in West Maitland.

*Always cheerful, never at any time mentally depressed, and full of energy, he possessed a gaiety of heart that lent itself in an 'infective' manner to those in his company. ... His nature was singularly free from any jealous feelings, and to his profession and the members thereof he was loyal to the core, many of whom are much indebted to his kindly interest on their behalf.*⁶

The incessant demands of his large practice caused his own health to decline, however, and so he retired temporarily to Wallerawang in the Blue Mountains, hoping that a change in pace would restore his vigour. In 1866, whilst in semi-retirement, Walter applied for a mineral lease of 240 acres (97 hectares) at Sawyer's Swamp, 2km east of Lidsdale. His holdings rapidly grew to 691 acres (279 hectares) thanks to the fortuitous presence of large torbanite (shale oil) reserves.⁷ The Mackenzie brothers soon single-handedly developed the kerosene industry in the area, which gave the region its moniker, 'Kerosene Vale'.

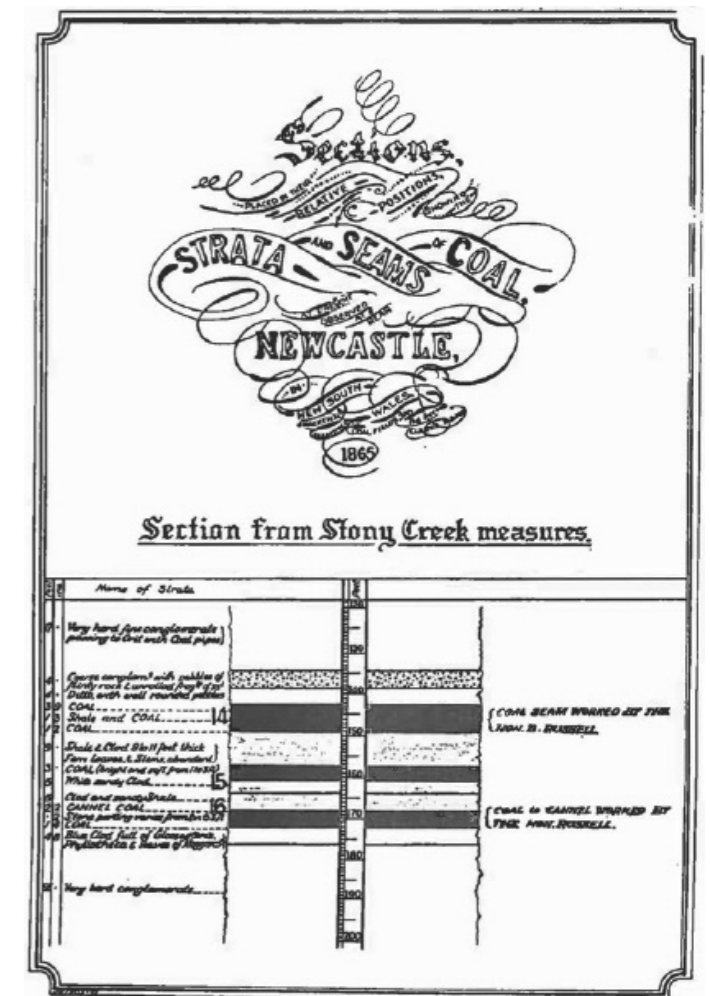
In the early 1870s, now boasting a much-improved physique, Walter moved to Sydney. He gained an enviable reputation as an able physician and a man of integrity and principle. This led to his appointment as Chief Medical Officer to the Australian Mutual Provident Society by 1876:

*Dr. Mackenzie is a deserved favourite with all classes of those who pass through his hands. His businesslike tact and his genial address put people at their ease at once, and renders the process either of diagnosis for a cognate disease or of investigation for life assurance purposes, easy even to the most nervous subject.*⁸

The Mackenzie brothers' positive attitude, talent and professionalism thus turned an uncertain future into successful careers, although half a world away from the familiar surroundings of their Lancashire childhoods.

References:

- 1 *Journal of the Legislative Council of New South Wales*, 1863. Session 1862. Vol. IX, Part 1. Sydney: Thomas Richards. P. 593.
- 2 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 27 July 1896. *The Examiner of Coalfields*. P. 8.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *The Welshman*, 6 December 1861. *Australia and New Zealand. For Melbourne*. P.1.
- 5 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 1896. Op. cit.
- 6 *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1886. *General News*. P. 5.
- 7 *Lithgow Mercury*, 12 June 1952. *Severance of link with early mining history*. P. 4.
- 8 *The Bulletin*, 8 April 1882. *Dr. W. F. Mackenzie*. Vol. 9, pp. 1–2.



Part of a 4 m-long chart (redrawn and reduced) prepared by John Mackenzie and the Rev. William Branwhite Clarke for an exhibition in 1865. (Branagan, D., & Diessel, C., 1993. *Lower Hunter Valley. History of geology and mining excursion. 27th Newcastle Symposium on Advances in the Study of the Sydney Basin*. P. 23.)