

WILLIAM SOLTAU DAVIDSON

(1846-1924)

Pioneer of the Frozen Meat Industry in New Zealand



The economic success of New Zealand in the second half of the 19th century was due in no small part to the endeavours of this man. Along with Thomas Brydone he pioneered the frozen meat export trade that was to become the backbone of New Zealand's export economy.

Although born in Canada, he came from a family that had its roots in Scottish banking and commerce. His father David Davidson had been the Edinburgh manager of the Bank of Scotland. William was educated at the Edinburgh Academy in preparation for a commercial career, but he was essentially a man of action who did not want a life behind a desk. In 1865 he took a cadetship in the Canterbury and Otago Association, a Scottish pastoral association.

He arrived at Port Chalmers on 30 December 1865 on the sailing ship Calaeno before travelling to Timaru to work on the famous Levels Estate. At this time this was a vast establishment of more than 150,000 acres extending into the South Island high country. Most of the estate staff were fellow Scots.

Over the next ten years, William learned and became skilled at the many and varied tasks required of a station manager and in 1875 became the Association's inspector. By this time the Association's holdings had grown to over 500,000 acres. William was heavily involved in the freeholding of much of this land.

A series of amalgamations of land companies including the original Canterbury and Otago Association had led to the establishment of the New Zealand and Australian Land Company which had a total land holding in both countries of three million acres by the mid-1870s. In 1878, in recognition of his competence, William was made General Manager of the company. This meant his return to Scotland where the company was based.

The company faced difficult times and sought to sell off many of its less profitable holdings. It was clear to William that, to make these holdings viable, substantial and stable markets for their produce needed to be accessible. It was this that led him into investigating the possibility of transporting meat to the British market in refrigerated ships. In 1881-1882 the first cargo of frozen meat was sent to Britain via Port Chalmers from North Otago on The Dunedin. Together with Brydone, William Davidson organised the whole project which opened the single most important chapter in New Zealand's economic development.

In the succeeding years he was instrumental in establishing the insurance and distribution infrastructure that was to make the meat and dairy export industries of New Zealand the success that they became in the 20th century. In addition to his interest in the meat industry he was also actively involved in the development and promotion of NZ's Corriedale sheep breed and the establishment of cheese making at Edendale in Southland. While he remained based in Britain after 1878, he continued to return to New Zealand on a regular basis over the following decades.

When he died on 17 July 1892 at Leuchie, North Berwick, he was a man whose achievements had made him justly respected on both sides of the globe and whose vision and energy had contributed greatly to economic prosperity.

In 2006, the New Zealand Business Hall of Fame named William Soltau Davidson as their '2006 Laureate' recognizing him as one "who had made outstanding contributions to business and to the nation".

In 2007, the New Zealand Government named the year Export Year 2007, and celebrated the 125th year of the first shipment of lamb from this country to an offshore market where 5,000 carcasses of mutton and lamb arrived in perfect condition in London.

JANE EMILY DAVIDSON 1848 – 1884

Jane Emily Davidson (Davidson by birth AND marriage) No photo

Wife of William Soltau Davidson

Born 5 Apr 1848 in St. Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, Scotland

Daughter of Archibald Davidson and Margaret (nee Dundas) Davidson

Married William Soltau Davidson on 10 Oct 1873 in Edinburgh, Scotland

Arrived in Dunedin, NZ in 1865 on the ship Celaeno

Died 7 Jan 1884 in Edinburgh, Scotland