

## Robert Stout (1844-1930)

From: *Chips off the Auld Rock* by Susan and Graham Butterworth, p. 44-45

We will meet Stout over and over again in this story – lawyer, politician, briefly Premier, Chief Justice for 27 years, Chancellor of the University of New Zealand and always patron of all things Shetland – but in 1863 he was a young schoolmaster, born in Lerwick in 1844, the son of Thomas Stout, a substantial merchant, and his wife, Margaret Smith. With a fine native intellect and a good education in science, mathematics, surveying and navigation, he had been attracted to New Zealand by reports of the gold rush, though he himself never took to the diggings. An added attraction was the fact that other Shetlanders, including friends of his family, were already here. He first lodged in Dunedin with one of these, a Mrs William Goudie. Stout, in his turn, helped other family friends, James and Anna Maria Ramsay, when they arrived a few months later in 1864.



Portrait of Robert Stout aged 21 (1865) by John Irvine

By the time he arrived aged 20, in 1863, Stout's youthful experiences in Shetland had already formed three of the principles to which he would hold for the rest of his long life. Like his later parliamentary colleague, the Scottish 'Jock' Mackenzie, he had seen at first hand the human cost of land clearances and would champion the principle of the State's leasing rather than selling crown land to curb the emergence of an oppressive class of large-scale landowners. The issue of 'Freehold' versus 'Leasehold' has long been forgotten in New Zealand, but it was one of the burning political questions of the later nineteenth century.

An unusually liberal education and a home where literary and theological questions were vigorously debated was the background to his religious position. His deep interest in science had led him to be a freethinker and agnostic, whilst being very well-informed upon religious and philosophical issues. He was a vigorous pamphleteer and public speaker and quickly became one of the intellectual stars of the fledgling Otago settlement. This was no small achievement, for its leadership was notably learned and dominated by conservative Presbyterians.

The third of his intellectual passions to have come out of Shetland was temperance, for he had seen the effects of drunkenness on some of the already poverty-stricken inhabitants of Lerwick. The battle for total abstinence from alcohol was lost long ago and, from this distance, easily looks comical and wowserish, but to those who saw the degrading effects of grossly excessive drinking on poor families and the boozy violence of rootless young men in a frontier society, it was a humanitarian crusade. Stout was always to the fore in it.

His influence in this matter lingered in one corner until 1967. When, almost 60 years after his arrival, the Wellington Shetland Society was formed and the by then venerable Chief Justice Sir Robert Stout became its patron, the rules included a stipulation that no alcohol was to be consumed at any function of the society. This rule stayed on the books until 1967, almost 40 years after Stout's death.

An intriguing little detail of Stout's early career is that when the Otago Harbour Board was formed in 1874, Stout, now an established lawyer, became its solicitor. His firm continued to act for the board long after Stout himself had moved on to his political life in the capital. It would be surprising if he did not use this position to assist Shetlanders into employment with the board. Such patronage was a normal part of political life at the time and Shetlanders would naturally gravitate to waterfront work.