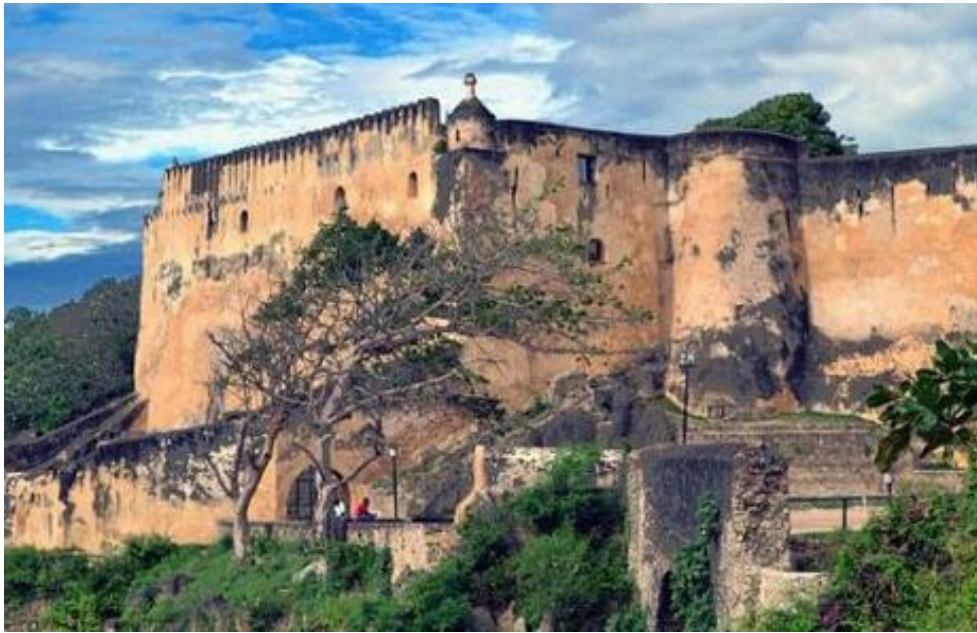


# From Dingwall to Mombasa: A Tale of Victorian Empire

*by Forbes Munro of Dingwall Museum*



*Fort Jesus, Mombasa © Fort Jesus Museum*

## Dingwall Roots

In the later 1880s two brothers with strong Dingwall connections established a British presence in the ancient coastal city of Mombasa, on the East African coast. There they laid foundations for what would become the colonial territories, and now the modern states, of Kenya and Uganda – yet they are little known in the Highland community from whence they originated. Who were these brothers, and why did they make history in a place so far from their roots? It is a lengthy story, with a few twists and turns.

George Sutherland Mackenzie and Edmund Norman Mackenzie were the grandsons of Kenneth Mackenzie - who owned the 'Head Inn' and the 'Caledonian Hotel' on Dingwall's High Street between the 1810s to the 1850s. (See Forbes' article on Kenneth and the early coaching days in Dingwall [here](#)). Their father, William, Kenneth's oldest son, was born in Dingwall in 1811. He attended the parish school and then the University of Aberdeen, before qualifying as a surgeon in London

## Military Life in India

In 1835 William Mackenzie joined the Madras Medical Service – which provided support for the East India Company's forces in southern India. Most of his early years he spent with the army of the Nizam of Hyderabad – the Company's principal ally in central India. In Hyderabad, William ran a military medical school and undertook research which would lead to him becoming an M.D. of the University of Aberdeen.

During the Mutiny of 1857, which shook British rule in India, William joined the medical team of the Central India Field Force which reasserted British authority in central districts of India. He



*Hyderabad in the 1830s © The British Library*

spent 1858-9 in a similar role with the Berar Field Force, tending field casualties and saving many lives. He received a knighthood for his services.

In 1838 William had married an Irishwoman named Margaret Prendergast in Hyderabad. They would have seven children in various locations in India – and one at sea when they came home on leave in 1849. From that brief visit onwards, they adopted the practice of sending their children home, once they were old enough, to Inchvannie (between Dingwall and Strathpeffer). There they were raised by William's unmarried sister, Jessie, and attended school until they reached their teens. George and Edmund, as the two younger sons, were among the last to arrive at Inchvannie – around 1860.



*Sir William Mackenzie © Dingwall Museum*



*Inchvannie House © Forbes Munro*

## Links to Sir William Mackinnon



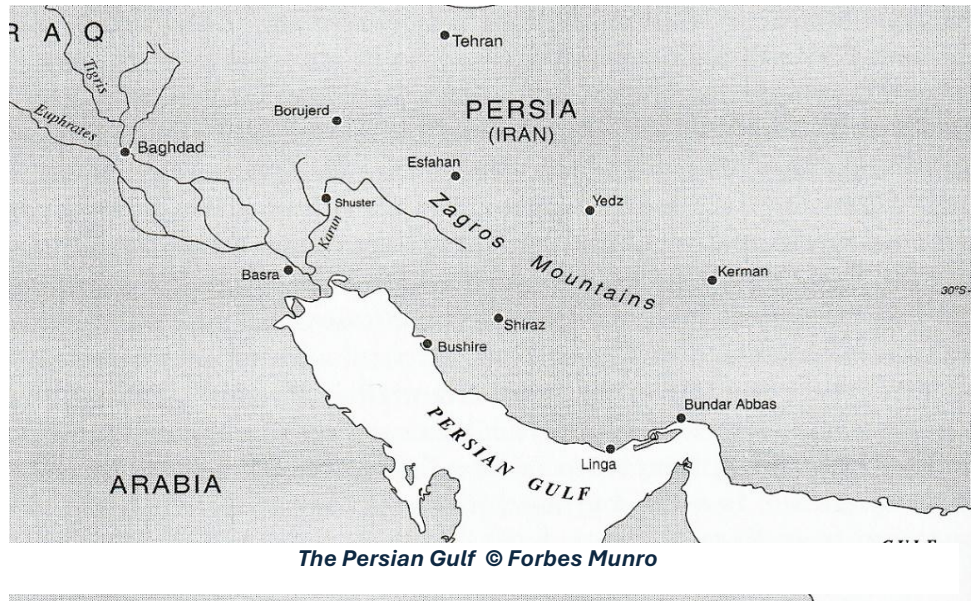
*William (later Sir William) Mackinnon  
© National Portrait Gallery, London*

During the 1860s William and Margaret lived in Madras (modern Chennai), where William had been promoted to Inspector-General (or head) of the Madras Medical Department. There in 1861 he met and befriended a fellow Scot - William Mackinnon, a merchant in Glasgow and Calcutta, who was busy creating the British India Steam Navigation Company. This shipping firm, known as "BI", grew to dominate coastal trade around India and the wider Indian Ocean.

Mackinnon used his connections to assist George and Edmund into careers. George, after three years of additional schooling in London, was found employment as a bank clerk in Dingwall – almost certainly in the local branch of the City of Glasgow Bank (in which Mackinnon was a director). Then, in 1866, he went to learn the cotton piece-goods trade in Manchester and in Mackinnon's Calcutta firm. Meanwhile Edmund left Inchvannie for an apprenticeship with Gray Dawes & Co in London. This Mackinnon-family firm served as the London agents for BI while also supervising its agencies in port cities across the western Indian Ocean. Thereafter, Mackinnon found positions for both young men within his rapidly expanding Indian Ocean maritime network.

## The Persian Gulf

George Mackenzie arrived in the Persian Gulf in 1868. He joined the BI agency at Bushire, on the Persian (Iranian) side of the Gulf, before establishing another agency at Basra, at the head of the Gulf (in modern Iraq). For the next 18 years he led the firms of Gray Mackenzie at Basra and Gray Paul at Bushire and Bandar Abbas. He did so mainly while being resident in the Gulf but latterly from within the 'parent' firm of Gray Dawes in London. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had given rise to hopes of an increase in trade between Britain and markets in the Gulf. However, local commercial conditions proved unfavourable.



George Sutherland Mackenzie  
© Royal Geographical Society

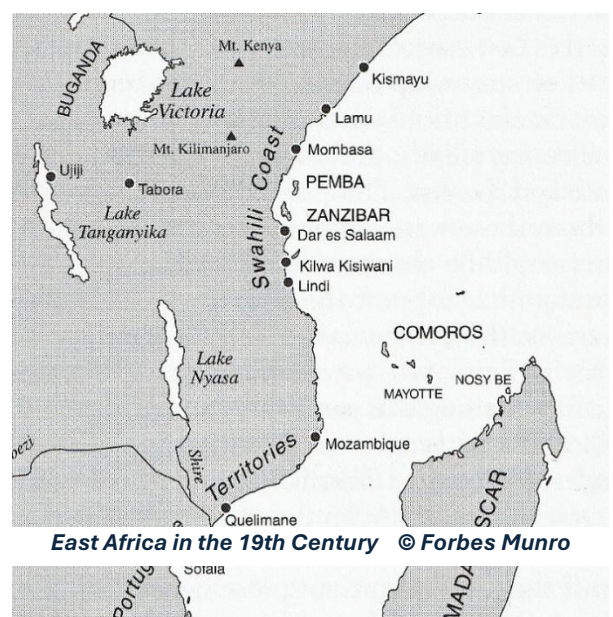
George, like others in Mackinnon circles, came to the view that British trade needed improved overland transport between the ports and the interior plateau of central Persia - where the bulk of its population lived. During the 1870s he undertook three expeditions across the mountains between the coast and interior, to seek out possible routes. The Royal Geographical Society published accounts of his travels. These had no immediate commercial results, although George did identify a possible future railway route from the Karun river onto the interior tableland.

In the mid-1880s, George's experience of life and work in the Gulf was redirected to another Arabic-speaking region served by BI's steamships. In coastal East Africa he found himself trading in the footsteps of his younger brother, Edmund.

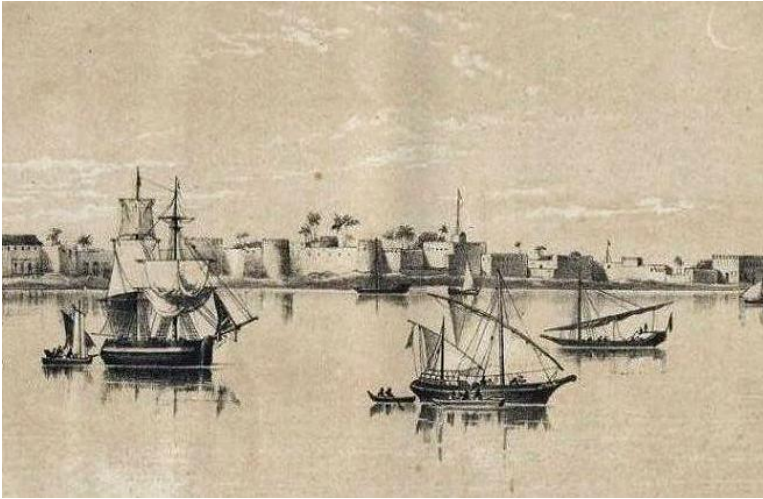
## Zanzibar

In 1872 BI established a steamship line down the eastern African coast between Aden and Zanzibar, interchanging at Aden with the company's services between London and India. Most of the sea-borne trade of East Africa passed through the island of Zanzibar – where Edmund Mackenzie arrived in 1875. He joined another young man named Archie Smith, who came from Mackinnon's Glasgow office, to set up the firm of Smith Mackenzie & Co.

Coastal trade in the region lay in the hands of well-established Indian and Arab merchants while ivory from the interior was handled by Arab-Swahili traders. Various explorers – including David Livingstone – had recently been mapping East Africa, and



their accounts generally held mixed views about the economic potential of the interior. Slavery was embedded at the coast and slave-trading was rife inland.



*Shipping at Zanzibar, c.1880 © Zanzibar Archives*

Smith Mackenzie & Co earned modest profits – by servicing the BI steamers, by outfitting the expeditions of explorers, by providing support to missionaries drawn to East Africa by Livingstone’s reputation, and by conducting trade on its own account.

William Mackinnon came to the view that in East Africa, as in the Persian Gulf, the success of his shipping line, and its agencies, would depend upon improvements in transport between coastal cities and their hinterlands. He was attracted to the idea

of developing a road or rail link to the chain of Great Lakes in the interior, where steam shipping might be developed.

In 1878, Edmund and Archie Smith were drawn into Mackinnon’s first attempt to turn this vision into reality - in a scheme that would transfer BI’s services and Smith Mackenzie itself from Zanzibar to Dar-es-Salaam, on the mainland. They attempted to buy property in Dar-es-Salaam for this purpose but met strong resistance from Indian and Arab merchants – who also persuaded the Sultan of Zanzibar to withdraw his support for the project.

Nevertheless, the idea of a relocation of BI and Smith Mackenzie to the mainland re-emerged some eight years later - as part of a scheme now focussed on the port of Mombasa rather than Dar-es-Salaam and involving the future of a large swathe of East African territory. Edmund and George both played significant parts in what followed.

### **Meanwhile . . .**

William Mackenzie retained his post of Inspector-General in Madras throughout the 1860s. In recognition of his performance he received yet another honour – the Star of India – in 1867. Then, in 1871, at the age of 60, he retired.

He did not return to the Highlands. He and Margaret preferred to retire to London, where they took a house in the Hyde Park district. There William offered private medical consultations to members of the Mackinnon family, and in 1878 his youngest daughter, Lucy, married William Mackinnon’s cousin, John Mackinnon, who was a London tea-broker. William did, however, come north occasionally – to visit his sister Jessie and support the newly-formed Dingwall company of the Boys Brigade.

He died in Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park, on 29 October 1895, aged 84 years.

### **The Imperial British East Africa Company**

In 1886, following German aggression against the Sultan of Zanzibar, Germany and Britain divided between them the Sultan’s mainland territory and its hinterland. Two years later, Mackinnon received a royal charter for a company to administer the new British ‘sphere of influence’ in East Africa. The Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEACo) had a short life – it was wound up in 1895 – but it paved the way for British rule over what became known as Kenya and Uganda.

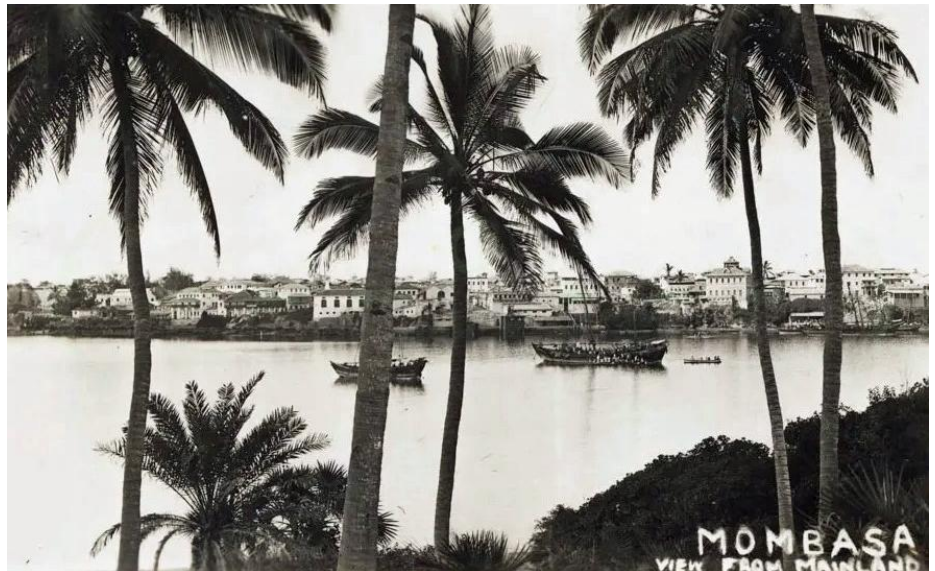
George Mackenzie became deeply engaged in Mackinnon’s plans. During 1886-7 he served as Secretary of the Emin Pasha Relief Committee, effectively the principal coordinator for what was seen as a first step towards the chartered company. (The idea was to bring material assistance to a survivor of General Gordon’s Anglo-Egyptian administration

who had been cut off by the Mahdi Uprising, and to install him and his Egyptian soldiers as agents of the proposed company on the headwaters of the Nile). Henry Morton Stanley, the highly self-publicised American explorer, became head of the 'relief expedition'. In February 1887, Stanley arrived in Zanzibar aboard a ship provided by BI. Edmund assisted him to recruit Swahili porters and obtain supplies, to be transported round Africa to the Congo River which Stanley intended to use to reach the Upper Nile.



Henry Stanley  
© State Library of New South Wales

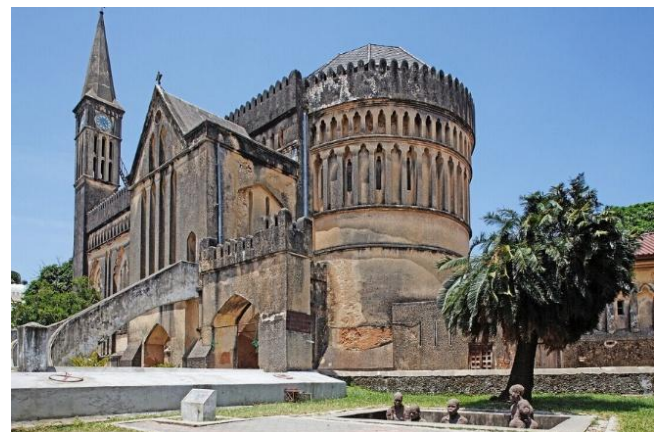
Shortly, thereafter, in July 1887, Edmund sailed from Zanzibar to Mombasa - tasked with buying land on the western part of Mombasa Island and on the mainland opposite. This land would be needed by the prospective company to transform Mombasa into a modern port and administrative centre, as well as a location from which a railway could be constructed.



Mombasa c. 1890 © Northwestern University

Having achieved his purpose, he returned to Zanzibar – where he died on 26 August 1887. The cause of death was a fever, almost certainly received from a mosquito bite in or around Mombasa. He was buried in Zanzibar, where his family would later erect a stained-glass window in his honour in the local Anglican Cathedral.

In 1888, George arrived in Mombasa to become the Imperial British East Africa Company's first Administrator in East Africa. It had been intended that this post would go to Henry Morton Stanley on his completion of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. However, Stanley was delayed on the Upper Nile and George stepped in to put the new company on a firm footing. Between 1888 and 1891, he developed the Mombasa port and its transport connections, building on Edmund's earlier activities. He also tried to head off German interference in the hinterland of the nominally British territory.



Anglican Cathedral, Zanzibar © frei.frans marc

His most important success, however, was in keeping peace with the local Arab people. To the south, in the German 'sphere', a full-scale revolt had broken out, fuelled by fears that the Germans were about to abolish slavery. There was a very real danger that the violence would spill over into British territory.

A potential flashpoint lay at a missionary station at Rabai, a little to the north-west of Mombasa, which had taken-in runaway slaves - whom their Arab owners wanted returned. George solved the problem by paying for the freedom of the slaves. In all, he secured the manumission of 1,400 slaves – at Rabai and elsewhere.

When a memorial to George was eventually placed in the Anglican Cathedral in Mombasa – a counterpart to Edmund’s stained-glass window in Zanzibar – it would take the form of a plaque commemorating his liberating of the slaves.

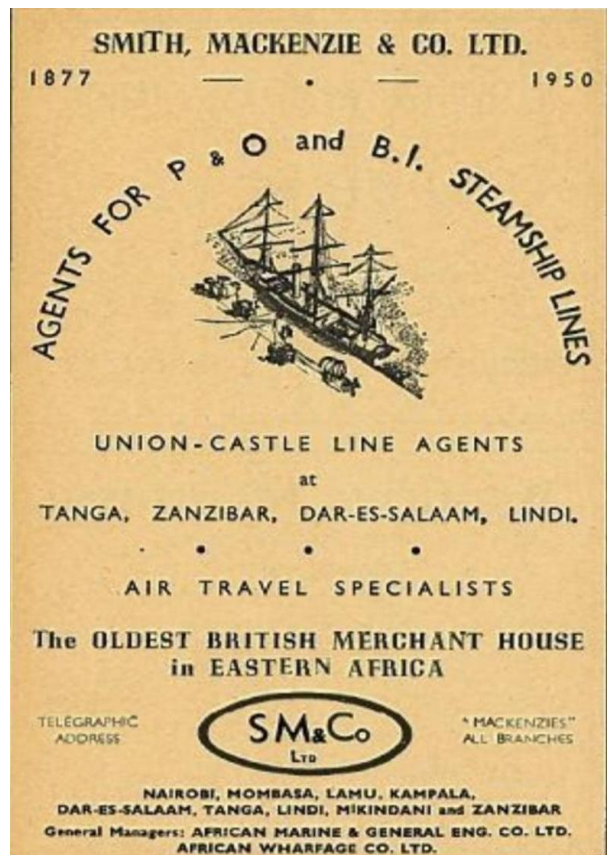
The Arab revolt in German territory had major consequences. The German East Africa Company collapsed, and the territory of Tanganyika came under the direct rule of the German imperial state. British policymakers now regarded Mackinnon’s company as too weak to compete with the German empire – which it also perceived as threatening the headwaters of the Nile and therefore British rule in Egypt. They terminated the IBEA Co and passed its functions to a new British colonial government.



*Ceremony of Manumission at Rabai © The Daily Nation, Nairobi*

During that transition, Edmund’s successor as head of Smith Mackenzie & Co successfully transferred the firm’s headquarters from Zanzibar to Mombasa. From there it would establish branches in many of the major towns in colonial East Africa and become what was probably the largest general trading company in the region.

George retired to London, where he served on the board of directors of the British India Steam Navigation Company and was Vice-President of the Royal Geographical Society from 1901 to 1905. He was knighted in 1902. However, he never entirely forgot his boyhood in the Dingwall area. When his Aunt Jessie died at Inchvannie in 1908 (at 100 years of age) he was the nephew who acted as executor of her estate. George died in 1910.



*Smith Mackenzie & Co poster, 1950*

*© Macmillan Library, Nairobi*



*Plaque to George S. Mackenzie, Anglican Cathedral, Mombasa © public domain*

**Acknowledgement:** the author wishes to thank Carina Saner, a descendant of the Mackenzies of Dingwall and Inchvannie, for assistance with his research.

**Sources:**

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