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From Coal Pit to Leather Pit:
Life Stories of Robert Semple

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of a PhD in History at Massey University

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Abstract

In the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* Len Richardson described Robert Semple as one of the most colourful leaders of the New Zealand labour movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Semple was a national figure in his time and, although historians had outlined some aspects of his public career, there has been no full-length biography written on him. In New Zealand history his characterisation is dominated by two public personas. Firstly, he is remembered as the radical organiser for the New Zealand Federation of Labour (colloquially known as the Red Feds), during 1910-1913. Semple’s second image is as the flamboyant Minister of Public Works in the first New Zealand Labour government from 1935-49.

This thesis is not organised in a chronological structure as may be expected of a biography but is centred on a series of themes which have appeared most prominently and which reflect the patterns most prevalent in Semple’s life. The themes were based on activities which were of perceived value to Semple. Thus, the thematic selection was a complex interaction between an author’s role shaping and forming Semple’s life and perceived real patterns visible in the sources. Chapter one explores Semple as an Australian New Zealander whose relationship with his homeland was a complex one, continually affected by issues such as time, place and political expediency. Chapter two considers Semple in the identity which was arguably the most radical in New Zealand historiography – the Socialist. Several facets of Semple’s socialism will be examined including militant socialism, from which his radical persona was formed, state socialism and practical socialism. To improve the lives of working people was Semple’s aim in life, so the third thematic chapter examines Semple’s role as a union organiser – this was a vehicle through which he pursued this aim. It was from this image that Semple’s public career was founded and then sustained. In the fourth chapter Semple, the Labour politician will be examined. Here his ultimate aim was to improve conditions for all New Zealanders and the several arenas in which Semple pursued this end included party activities, municipal politics and ministerial office. In these two chapters changes in Semple’s political perspectives can be seen as labour concerns became subservient to national concerns when he became part of the Labour government. Chapter five examines Semple as an anti-militarist which was the image where the greatest change in political perspective was evidenced. Semple, the anti-conscriptionist of one world war, drew the marble for the first conscription ballot in the next. These themes are not the only ones in Semple’s life but appear most consistently during his lifetime.
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I am indebted to the Knight family, a branch of Semple’s Australian relatives. My contact in the Knight family was Dale Liepins in Canberra. Dale presides over a vast collection of Knight/Semple family history which includes Birth/Death/Marriage Certificates, newspaper cuttings, photographs and other memorabilia. The family history has been accumulated over time by Dale and other family members including her mother, Thelma Montgomery and her uncle, Doug Knight. For the purposes of this thesis these are acknowledged as the Knight Family History Collection (KFHC). Dale provided a steady stream of valuable information by email, telephone, compact disc and photocopied a large amount of material which she forwarded to me. Any questions I asked were always answered promptly and without hesitancy and Dale was always very helpful and enthusiastic about the project. One of the highlights of this research was personally meeting Dale in Canberra while I was researching Semple in Australia.

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Carina Hickey, January 2010.

**Front Cover Acknowledgements**

The Leather Pit in the title of this thesis refers to the leather seats in Parliament. In Maurice Gee’s novel *Plumb* the central character George Plumb describes visiting Parliament and seated in the public gallery he refers to Semple, Fraser, Nash and Parry “and there they were, in their rimu-panelled, padded-leather pit”.

Front-page cover shows Robert Semple after he was elected to Parliament, 1929, F-18790-1/1, Alexander Turnbull Library (WTU).

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Abbreviations and Illustrations

Abbreviations used in text
AJHR    Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives.
AOL     Alliance of Labour.
CMT     Compulsory Military Training.
CP      Communist Party of New Zealand.
FOL     Federation of Labour.
KFHC    Knight Family History Collection, Canberra.
NA      National Archives, Wellington.
NZLP    New Zealand Labour Party.
NZPD    New Zealand Parliamentary Debates.
RHSC    Robert H. Semple Collection, Perth.
SDP     Social Democratic Party.
UFL     United Federation of Labour.
ULP     United Labour Party.
VCMA    Victorian Coal Miners’ Association.
WCCA    Wellington City Council Archives, Wellington.
WLRC    Wellington Labour Representation Committee.
WTU     Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

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The Chronological Life

1873  Robert Semple born near Sofala, New South Wales, Australia.

1878 – 1883  Attended Sofala Public School.

1883  Started work in the coalmines at Lithgow.

1883/1890s  Worked in various mining occupations in the Greater Lithgow area, then in Newcastle district of New South Wales.

1887  Mother MaryAnn Semple died.

1893  Father John Semple died.

1890s  Moved to South Gippsland, Victoria.

1898  Married Margaret McNair. Resident in Outtrim. Member of the Outtrim Miners’ Association Lodge and Miners’ Union Federation, the militant Victoria Coal Miners Association.

1899  Son Robert Francis Semple born in Outtrim.

1900  Moved to coal mining town of Collie, Western Australia.

1901  Brother John Semple killed fighting in Boer War, South Africa. Worked mining in WA towns of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.

1902  Moved back to South Gippsland, resident in Korumburra.

1903  Daughter Agnes Vida Semple born in Korumburra. Becomes President of Coal Creek Miners’ Union in Korumburra. Also President of Political Labour League in district.

1903/04  Great Victorian Coal strike. Semple represented miners in both negotiations with employers and in interstate travel soliciting funds for striking miners.

1904  Blacklisted during dispute Semple moves to New Zealand. Arrives Runanga, West Coast ca June 1904. Secured work at State Mine and became first President of Coal Creek Miners Union established ca September 1904.

1905/06  Employed by the Public Works department on the Staircase Gully viaduct and other work on the Midland Railway Line in the South Island.

1907 Daughter Ella May Semple born in Runanga.

1907 President of the State Miners Union. Integral in the formation of branches of the New Zealand Socialist Party on the West Coast.

1908 Integral in the establishment of the New Zealand Federation of Miners.

1909 Miners’ Federation becomes the New Zealand Federation of Labour (FOL).

1910 – 1913 Became official Organiser for the FOL.

1911 Son Leonard Victor Semple born in Runanga.

1912 Travelled to Australia aiming to strengthen ties of industrial unionism with Australian unions. Actively involved in Waihi Miners’ strike.

1913 Moves to Wellington. As a result of Unity Conference appointed organiser for United Federation of Labour (UFL). Involved in Great Waterfront strike, briefly imprisoned.

1914 Travels to Australia early in year to solicit organising funds for labour organisations. Resigns in October as organiser of UFL.


1916 Visits Australia campaigning against conscription. Imprisoned December 1916 for opposition to conscription in New Zealand. Served nine months in Lyttleton Gaol.

1918 Elected MP for Wellington South in by-election. Lost seat a year later in general election of 1919.

1920 – 1924 Leader of co-operative labour party that built the Orongorongo tunnel which supplied water to Wellington City.

1924 - 1926 National Organiser for New Zealand Freezing Workers’ Federation.

1926 – 1928 President of the New Zealand Labour Party.

1925 – 1935 Labour representative on Wellington City Council.

1927 – 1929 Secretary of the Wellington General Labourers’ Union.
1928  Elected MP for Wellington East representing seat until 1946, then MP for Miramar 1946-1954.

1930  Eldest son Robert Francis Semple killed in car accident

1935  When Labour government elected Semple became Minister of Public Works and Transport.

1937  Suffered physical and mental breakdown. Trip to Australia for recuperation.

1940  Became Minister of National Service. Draws first marble in conscription ballot.

1941  Visits Australia in search of steel and war supplies for New Zealand

1941/42  In further Cabinet reshuffles relinquishes Transport and National Service portfolios, and is allocated Railways, Rehabilitation and Marine. Becomes Minister of Works when Public Works absorbed into Works.

1948  Publication *Why I Fight Communism* and nationwide tour denouncing Communism. Last visit to Australia, again in quest for steel supplies for New Zealand.


1954  Dogged by ill-health for past two years retired prior to 1954 general election. Moved to New Plymouth to live with son.

1955  Died 31 January at New Plymouth.