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# From Coal Pit to Leather Pit:

Life Stories of Robert Semple



A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
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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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University Library, Wellington City Council Archives, Wellington Regional Council Archives. Also Australian institutions: The Bathurst District Historical Society, The Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra, The State Library and the Public Record Office in Melbourne, The New South Wales State Library and the State Record Office in Sydney. The funding of this thesis has been made possible by a Doctoral scholarship and the Bailey Bursary granted by Massey University, for which I am most grateful. Finally, I want to thank Robert Semple for without his courage and strength of conviction there would be no stories to tell.

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".<sup>1</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Gee, *Plumb*, Auckland: Penguin, 1991, p. 148.

## 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.

- 1906** Back in Runanga. Son John Hector Ronald Semple born.
- 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.
- 1915 – 1919** National Miners' Federation rebuilt. Semple appointed workman's inspector and agent.
- 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.
- 1949** Publicly supported peace-time conscription. End of Ministerial career when Labour government defeated in 1949.
- 1951** Waterfront strike. Views aligned with FOL rather than Labour Party. Holds seat in 1951 general election. Moved to Otaki.
- 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.