

"EVER A FIGHTER"

by F. L. Combs

AT the creation John Milton's lion was described as emerging from the ground and pawing to get free. None of us do succeed in parting with our native soil. Robert Semple's tap root was stronger and more tenacious than that of most of us. He became a New Zealander, but just as much he remained a product of Australia, where as an ex-standard two pupil and a child of ten he went to work in the mines of Turon. What a beginning for a man of genius!

Most children of genius go under. Mr. Semple did not. Joint, muscle, mind and nerve: he was made to endure, and there is nothing tougher in the whole realm of nature than human flesh and bone. The hammer blows and lashings of early experience harden the fibre of a man destined to rise. In the words of Browning our subject was ever a fighter and he advanced with fire and force to meet every challenge. His whole career, owing to his courage and energy, was a triumph over the challenges of a strenuous life.

Ever a fighter? He would have said with truth, in a manner that was sometimes egotistical, that he was ever a battler loyal to the causes he had learned to espouse from his early days. Loyalty to the class he belonged to was ingrained in his lean and sinewy frame. Even when walking along Lambton Quay to the Bowen Street Entrance he seemed to be preparing for a frontal attack. He did not relish criticism (who does?) but it roused him and caused him to bring all his guns to bear.

The Australia that had moulded Mr. Semple was that of *On Our Selection*. A humorous book? I grant it, but now when I read it I think it an unhappy book. What grinding penury, what brutal mischances its Australians had to undergo! But they had buoyancy and vitality and resilience and stood up to things. Were they annealed by the blazing Australian sun?

Mr. Semple even in his late prime had a spring in his step and a glow in his eyes. In his last years, when age was overtaking him, he still held his gaunt, broadshouldered frame erect, but it was saddening to notice how slow was his gait, for one could see that he still hankered to be in the front of the battle.

I have called Mr. Semple a man of genius. Who that sat with him in the House has made so many original additions to our speech? Carpet slippers for bureaucrats? He "would equip them with running shoes." When it was alleged that he was making thousands out of undercover timber deals he replied that he did not "own enough timber in Australia to build a lavatory for a cockroach." Then there were the profiteers "who had hearts like cash registers and eyes like florins." He spoke also of "street corner spittoon philosophers" and "snivelling snufflebusters." Obviously he did not conciliate opponents. He was forthright and could be vulgar and not seldom went too far to be fair.

The reason? Surely those early tribulations of an underdog made him determined, as his manhood approached, to take nothing lying down. He knew more of human injustice than most other men, and with emotions that became lava hot he made it his life-long task to defy it on behalf of both his fellow workers and himself. He had the instincts of an orator; like Mr. Churchill he could not forgo the saying of a good thing. His own utterance excited him and he was apt to go beyond bounds. I once heard him addressing an audience of thirty, including some pests of small boys. When he started we heard the still small voice of reason; before he finished, wrought upon by his own eloquence, he might have been speaking to spell-bound thousands.

I must again insist on Mr. Semple's genius. It could be a humorous genius. At a labour conference he let himself



THE HONOURABLE ROBERT SEMPLE

go, and for an hour had everybody doubled up with laughter and wishing, so helpless were they with mirth, that he would stop. In his "different" way he was during that hour the peer of Chaplin.

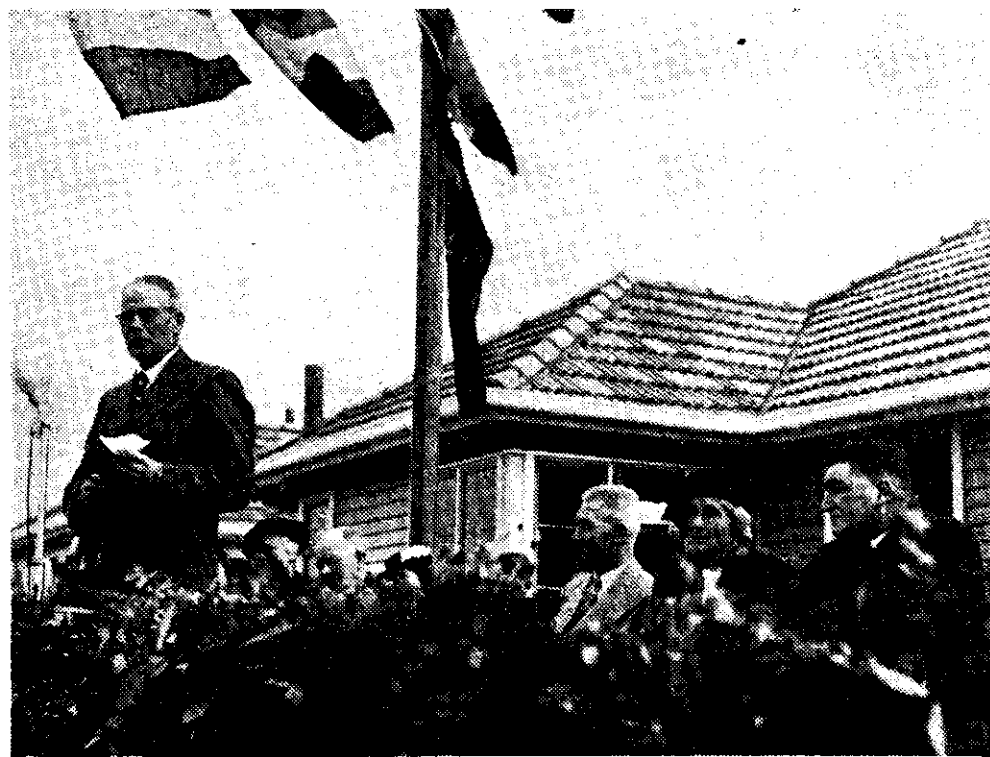
And what of his achievement? No doubt the new way in public works was due and overdue, but it was with Mr. Semple that it came. Has there ever been as bold and confident an initiative in this ministry? I doubt it. To those who have an historical eye, these works will be his monument. But maybe too there will be a personal monument. If so, I hope we will break with conventions for this most unconventional man. What ought his monument to be? I think a lean navvy on a bulldozer riding roughshod over as many wheelbarrows as the sculptor cares to put in for the money. I know that sculptors are always majestic, but I hope that Mr. Semple's sculptor will also be a humorist.

I must stop, having said less than a quarter of what there is to say of the ten-year-old boy who entered the mines and, though he knew it not, was destined to become one of the half-dozen most memorable of the public men of these islands. All honour to the indomitable quality in one who, starting

on the bottom rung, would not let himself be kept down. Such are the heart timber of democracy.

HIS ENTRY IN "WHO'S WHO"

SEMPLER, Hon Robert, MP for Miramar, B Sojala, NSW, 1873, s of John Semple; m 27.6.1898 Margaret, d of Thos McNair, of Vic (formerly of NZ); 3 s, 2 d. Ed Sojala sch; worked for 26 yrs on goldfields of Australia (1st as trucker; then as miner); was in Coolgardie in rough days of mining; at about 23 yrs of age entered trades union movement; associated with unions in various states, chiefly Vic and WA; ardd. NZ '03; employed in state mines on W coast and formed 1st miners' union at Runanga (pres for some years); assisted to form 1st Miners' Fedn of NZ about '08 (pres); when this merged into Fedn of Labour (better known as "Red Fedn"), about '10, became organiser; '12 Fedn became nationally involved as result of miners' strike at Waihi; '13 helped to organise and took leading part in Unity Conference, out of which grew Social Democ Party and United Fedn of Labour, many unions coming in; Prof Mills was elected organiser of political wing and Mr. Semple (unopposed) as organiser of industrial wing; involved in waterside workers' strike '13, in which specials were mobilised; imprisoned and bound over to keep peace for 12 months in bond of £2000 (heaviest bond imposed on any labour representative); remained in organisation until bond expired, and resigned as organiser '15 on going to S Is to engage in co-operative tunnelling contracts at Otira tunnel (8 months); elected by large majority as miners' agent and inspector, which post held for 5 years, having many big fights with mineowners; lived at W'ton during war; imprisoned for 3 years for resisting conscription (served 12 months); MP for W'ton S '18-19, manager for Orongorongo co-operative tunnelling party '21-24; with picked party of men carried out work successfully, beating Australasian records for tunnelling (excluding drink, gambling, etc., from camps and devoting whole energies to work); on completion of contract '24 appointed organiser for Freezing Workers and Related Trades; contested Otaki seat '25; MP for W'ton E '28-46; since for Miramar; in Savage and Fraser ministries '35-49 held portfolios of Public Works, Transport, Marine, National Service and Railways; War Adminstrn '42; W'ton City C '25; contested mayoralty; Harb Bd.



Mr. Semple performs one of his last ministerial acts—handing over the key of the 30,000th State house, in Christchurch, September, 1949