

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 22: Bob Part 1: The Man, the Myth, the Legend. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Cheryl and Viðarrbjörn (I hope I pronounced that right!). If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we talked about how to process harakeke, New Zealand flax, from the leaves of the plant into muka fibre that can be then woven into clothes and other useful items. I did say we would talk about these this week but I have something slightly different and very exciting for this episode. I recently recorded a collaboration with the awesome Kayden of the fantastic Happy Hour History Podcast about a part of New Zealand history that I have been dying to tell since I started HANZ. It is one of my favourite stories from our history that you probably have never heard of. I wanted this to be about a single thing but upon research, I couldn't help but expand it out to include the life and backstory of the key figure of this particular thing. As such this will be in two parts, as you probably guessed from the title. Part two will be available on the HANZ feed in a week or two but it will appear on the Happy Hour History Podcast feed earlier so if you like this episode and want to hear the rest of it ASAP then head over to Happy Hour History for Part 2, and while there give the rest of the episodes a look as it is a great comedy history podcast introducing non-history fans into some of the best stories from our past, I really can't recommend it highly enough.

Now, a bit of a warning, this will not be like a regular episode, as it is in Happy Hour format. What this means is it is an informal chat between me and Kayden with me teaching her about my topic and as the name implies, she was having a couple of drinks. I myself had more than a few and got, shall we say, pretty smashed. As such there is heavy swearing, mostly from me, which I understand many may be uncomfortable with or may not want to listen with kids. That is fine and it is totally understandable but just giving you a heads up. The tale is also out of the timeline, being set in the early 20th century so there is that as well if you don't wish to listen to a topic that is not based in our current pre-European Maori period. We will return to this topic when we get to it in the chronology, whenever that may be, so don't worry about missing out completely. With those warnings in place, as Kayden would say, sorry mum, I know you would be ashamed of my foul language. Strap yourselves in for the story of Bob Semple or as I like to call him, Bobby Big Nuts.

Bobby "Big Nuts" Semple: The Man

Born 1873 in NSW, Australia just outside the small mining town of Sofala (~3.5hr drive NW of Sydney). Went to primary school until age 9 when he worked in the coal mines, working in a number of mines throughout his teen years, eventually moving to Victoria to work in the lignite mines (lowest rank of coal, brown coal, made from compressed peat). Married Margaret MacNair in 1898 and began to get involved with the unions before eventually being drawn to Western Australia by the goldrush of the early 1890s.

Stayed in WA for a bit until forced to return to Victoria due to Margaret's illness. Settled in Korumburra (~1.5hr drive SE of Melbourne) and became president of the local branch of the Victorian Coal Miners' Association, which involved being a part of a lengthy, bitter and violent industrial dispute. Due to this, he was black listed in the industry and left for Aotearoa New Zealand under a fake name in 1903 or 1904. Ended up working in a newly opened coal mine at Runanga (5min drive north of Greymouth). At this point he was said to have a "dashing figure: high prominent cheek bones, a drooping moustache that accentuated sunken cheeks and sparseness of build gave the impression of a tall, angry young man." (Young Bob pictures) Three months after his arrival in NZ, he was made inaugural president of the Coal Creek State Mines Union, however, a few months after that, mining work in Runanga dried up and he went to work as a tunneller on a railway

for a year or so. Once back in Runanga to register with the Court of Arbitration, a court set up to deal with industrial disputes. Semple would later condemn this as an instrument of state oppression.

Eventually, the Runanga union community started to get bigger, more organised and more radical. A miners hall was opened with words on the walls "United we stand, divided we fall" "The world is my country, to do good is my religion" "Not for a race, but for all of mankind" "Worlds wealth for worlds workers" Dude was a fucking socialist basically. The hope was to make a series of national unions, rather than local, town based ones to combine the strength of all working class, which appealed to Semple and his fiery passions.

Became known as 'Bob the Ranter' and 'Fighting Bob' due his tenacity, combative spirit, flamboyant and passionate speaking and his ability to bully or cajole. He used the victory of the Blackball strike to show that workers could throw off the yoke of arbitration easier than they thought. This lead him to go up and down the West Coast to drum up support for a regional industrial union, bringing all labour into one organisation as a first step to getting rid of the arbitration system. This was somewhat ignored, mostly by watersiders (dock workers) so Semple and his Runanga union mates went back to talk to the people they knew, the coal miners, attempting to make a union just for miners, leading to the creation of the New Zealand Federation of Miners in 1908. This also lead to various mining officials pulling out of the arbitration system, convinced by Semple and his speeches.

Semple began using his confidence and bravado to expand the new organisation to include transport workers and watersiders, being renamed the New Zealand Federation of Labour (colloquially known as the Red Feds), with Semple as its organiser. He roamed the country, advocating industrial unionism and made employers shit themselves with threats of widespread industrial revolt. Very few were prepared to call it a bluff and attack Semple directly, in fact, some unions that didn't have the resources or will to face their employers in the open sometimes used Semple's name to get them to back down, making him somewhat of a socialist bogeyman in the eyes of industry leaders. The Federation wasn't without its criticisms though, mostly coming from Semple's own team as the more militant members of his ideology thought that the Federation had just replaced the arbitration system and had now become part of 'the man' and lost its revolutionary potential due to its size. Semple found this hard to counter.

In 1912, the new PM, W. F. Massey, gave more power to employers in an attempt to drive back unions to the arbitration system. To combat this, Semple wanted to conduct 'united, dreadful and short' strikes rather than engage in prolonged and expensive fights that they would be unlikely to win. Semple may have been a hot headed and passionate revolutionary, but he didn't have the big dumb. He was right not to go balls to the wall as the government did fear his wilder outburst might fuel a uncontrollable general strike amongst all workers in all industries, but especially the West Coast miners (This did eventually happen in 1979 with 300,000 workers going on strike). As such, the police monitored Semple's movements closely, resulting in him still remaining a key and colourful figure in the New Zealand labour movement, just one that was more cautious and aware. Though, in 1912, he did say he would not trust the police with "a diseased cat" and even said in regards to the death of Fred Evans in the Waihi strike, who police claimed had shot a cop, that he was "doing his duty and should have shot more of them". Despite this, it was noted that he specifically did not advocate for a general strike.

Some more stuff happened, with the newly formed United Federation of Labour (a political party rather than a union like the NZFL) going up against the government directly, that resulted in Semple's arrest but eventually he was released. This ended up being kinda good cause the rest of

the leadership of the UFL got fucked but since he was locked up for a little bit, he avoided it, becoming the organiser of the reconstructed UFL.

When war was declared in 1914, Semple flourished as a talented propagandist. He had long been a critic of compulsory military training, even being prosecuted in 1913 for failing to reveal his son's age to a defence officer. He was again arrested and refused to pay the 4 pound fine, but Runanga locals paid for him and he was released. He was also an outspoken critic of conscription when it was introduced and tried to use his union position and the collective industrial strength of the miners to combat it, even hinting at a general strike in the coalfields. This made the government shit itself, faced with a potential coal shortage if this were to occur, especially during a war of global proportions.

In 1913, Semple and his family left Runanga for Wellington, the capital and by now he was a national figure, even being elected to Parliament as MP for Wellington South a year after he was released from prison. He went into politics under the banner of the New Zealand Labour Party (well, not quite, it was probably the United Labour Party, a predecessor to the modern Labour party formed in 1916) which had partly been formed with the aid and integration of the UFL. The introduction of the refreshed Labour Party kinda rocked Parliament's world, especially with their newest member who said that they had, "not come to this House to perpetuate a class war or to create class division. The class war is already here in all its hideousness." And said that it was Labour's purpose to "obliterate the class line" and build a society on "reasonable and democratic lines". Although represented an urban electorate his key movements in Parliament were often for rural, working class communities that he was so passionate about. He defiantly challenged a parliamentary opponent to "live in the same shacks that the miners have to live" and to try do the same job as a miner, "stripped almost as naked as the day he was born", saying it would be an experience that would "trim some of the conservative notches off him". Semple was not fucking around. Despite being the Maoriland Worker, a working class paper/journal, saying "the rabid declamator using wild and whirling words and windmill gesticulations" was adjusting to his new environment, Semple was rejected at the polls of the 1919 election. He wouldn't return to national politics as a member for 10 years.

Instead he was part of various unions, organising and advocating, such as the National Freezing Workers' Federation. He was also part of the WCC for a time. Though he wasn't at the centre of New Zealand's labour movement, he was still circling close to the nucleus. In 1925, he stood for Parliament for Otaki, a town about half way between Palmerston North and Wellington but lost. He was eventually elected president of the New Zealand Labour Party, now having reached it's final form to the one we know today. In 1928 he came back to Parliament and represented Wellington East until 1946 and then Miramar, another electorate in Wellington until he retired in 1954.

Up until this point, despite his personality, he was on the margins of the party, not taking too much part in the construction of policy. Additionally, up until this point, Labour had it's own government, only acting as either a coalition partner or as the opposition, a title which it had earned in 1926. But, in 1935, that would change under the famous leadership of Michael Joseph Savage to become the First Labour Government. In fact, Semple was one of the first people chosen for Savage's cabinet as Minister of Public Works, a ministry dedicated to major engineering projects such as dams (like the Clyde Dam), military installations like hangers and gun emplacements and railways. He was a natural fit due to his background as well as the fact he had worked for them briefly on other projects back in the day. Semple brought all his fire, passion and wild zest he had during his time with the Red Feds, once seen driving a Cat tractor over a wheelbarrow and shovel. Though he was very much a showman, his pragmatism, drive and very rural NZ attitude of "lets get shit done" put him at the forefront of Labour's policies of trying to get the country back on track after the Great Depression.

Semple took his previous attitudes as well into his new role, often being generous to the workers under him but overriding officials, which some may have seen as too interventionist for a minister into his department. Something cool he did was to give all workers placed on standard rates of pay, even Maori who had previously been on lower rates than their Pakeha counterparts. Some professional staff feared Semple would hand over power in the department to the workers' committees but were eventually reassured with various concessions.

The outbreak of WW2 marked a severe change in Semple. Although he had always been somewhat authoritarian in his role as Minister, he dealt harshly with anyone in the Public Works Department that criticised the war effort or even just the Labour Party. In 1940 he was made Minister of National Service (one of a series of portfolios created specially due to the war to help share the load of Minister of Defence) and pushed for the first conscription ballot, something many would take as betrayal given his staunch opposition in earlier life. It was about this time that Bobby "Bug Nuts" Semple built his magnum opus. (Older Bob pictures)

Bobby: The Tank

Darwin is a city of about 130,000 in the Northern Territory of Australia on Aussies northern coast. In 1942, it was bombed by 242 planes from the Japanese Empire, dropping more bombs on the city than that at Pearl Harbour. It was the single largest attack by a foreign power on Australian soil. Although this is a couple of years ahead in the story, I want to illustrate that during WW2 there was an ever present threat, especially prior to the United States entering the war, that Australia and New Zealand would be invaded by the Japan and would likely fall as a result. The Empire of the Rising Sun had steamed through areas like Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua and others, openly talking about how undefended and vulnerable New Zealand was. The mood in Aotearoa would have been one similar to that of the British at the same time with Dunkirk, faced with a very likely Nazi invasion of the British Isles. The Japanese were in fact correct about New Zealand's defencelessness, we had six Bren Gun Carriers (a small, lightly armoured vehicle carrying a Bren gun) for the whole country, a country whose landmass is similar to Japan itself. Britain in 1940 was much more concerned for its own survival as mentioned so supplies of any description be they guns, ammo, food, materials or tanks would not be arriving any time soon. In steps, Minister of Public Works, Bobby "Big Nuts" Semple saying, "If this country is going to be invaded, we need to have equipment as good as that of the other fellow, if not better... we could not buy tanks from outside, but had to act on our own resources. Luckily we had big tractors here, and they were a godsend. They have proved one of the greatest boons the country has ever known, permitting us to build highways, aerodromes, camps, and fortifications in record time in the Dominion. They have proved invaluable for other urgent purposes outside New Zealand."

Aotearoa had no armoured force, that is, no tanks. So we had to get them from somewhere. Initially the Department of Defence had made enquiries to the US for supplies of armoured plate. Semple though had seen a photo of a Caterpillar tractor which had been converted into a tank on an American postcard and the spark for a legend was born. It would take time to get blueprints for the tank in America, so Semple, with his "lets do this" attitude (joke for the kiwis) said fuck that and got to work with no plans whatsoever with his departmental engineers in Temuka, South Canterbury. The idea would be to take the 81 Caterpillar tractors (similar to bulldozers) and build armoured bodies for them. (Tractor picture) This would be effective as the vehicles could operate as per normal in the fields until called upon for military service, where the armour would be fitted, which would require minimal modification to the tractor itself. An early prototype was made in June 1940 with the armour being substituted for plywood at this early stage. Even at this point, armament for anti-tank or infantry support roles was ruled out due to various restrictions. However, a 37mm

cannon on a revolving turret and machine guns were seen as being of vital importance. Due to those war time issues of procurement though, a cannon could not be sourced and was instead replaced with another machine gun. This would mean the tank would be armed with six Bren .303 caliber machine guns, one on each side, one on the back, one in the turret and two on the front bringing the total crew of the tank to 8, when adding a driver and commander. Though, that was in an ideal world where New Zealand could field enough men. It should also be noted, one of the six gunners did need to lie on a mattress on top of the engine, not an ideal position.

The next step was to make the tank in the actual steel plate armour to present it to the Army for consideration. However, the steel was not available, not even from Australia, so instead corrugated iron was used. This metal is commonly used in New Zealand for quick and dirty projects like sheds and can be seen lying around not really doing anything. Very common but not really designed for armour. Adding the corrugated iron reduced the speed of the tractor-come-tank to 10km (5-6mph). Along with this, the body rolled badly while off road making fire on the move very difficult (need to remember bulk of NZ landmass, even today, is rural). When shown to the Army they weren't happy with the lack of turret cannon, but said fuck it, there are no other options and ordered three more to be built.

The armour of these three new tanks would consist of two layers of corrugated iron resulting in a total of 21mm (0.82 inches) of armour. This was supposedly "severely tested" and was alleged to be sufficient to stop anti-tank rifle bullets as well as being easy to make. Special trailers were also made to move them around, being able to be unloaded and combat ready in a matter of minutes. (Trailer picture) In January, 1941 the first tank was finished and by March, so was the second with the third finished later that year. The first two tanks took part in a parade in Christchurch in April, with one being sent to Wellington and Auckland to promote the war effort. This was met with public ridicule and earned the tanks their name "Bob Semple's tank" later reduced to just calling them the Bob Semple. The ridicule at these events wasn't entirely misguided as the crews were instructed not to change gears as the whole tank had to be made stationary to do so and Semple worried that the public may think the tank had stalled. (Tank picture and Semple next to tank)

In August 1941, the tank armour was subjected to more testing, specifically intensive machine gun fire and accurate close range sniping resulting in some weaknesses being highlighted with the machine gun ports allowing for some bullets to enter the tank. Even so, The Chief of General Staff, Major General Edward Puttick, in absence of an alternative said that it was a very useful weapon for a certain style of warfare. Fun fact, Puttick later attained the rank of Lieutenant General and was the first NZ born person to do so. Anyway, the general thought it was powerfully armed and the speed was sufficient. The only thing he didn't like was the height, in particular the turret which added about 60cm (2 feet) for not really any gain as it was just another machine gun and not a cannon. Puttick recommended its removal. The tank was now known as Semple's tank despite the Army's involvement in its development. Further tests were conducted in October 1941 at the Burnham camp near Rolleston outside Christchurch with Puttick in attendance. The Major General was an experienced commander having recently returned from the war in the Mediterranean so he knew his stuff and said "The arrangement of the turret and of the machine guns was ingenious and efficient" and that "I was impressed with the skill and ingenuity displayed by those concerned in the tank's design and manufacture, adapting a civilian vehicle for military purposes". So despite this tank being laughed at and becoming a meme in recent times, there was at least someone with actual military experience that thought it was a half decent crack at making a tank. (There is even a question on Quora asking what would win between 10 Tiger tanks and 4000 Bob Semple tanks, amongst other meme comparisons). (Tank video)

However the tank was tied to Semple personally, hence his name all over it and as such his political opponents used it as ammo against him. Which was easy given the tank was pretty terrible, it was slow, hard to fire when moving, had no cannon, comparatively weak armour to tanks of a similar weight, needed to be stationary to change gears and had no top hatch, the only exit being out a single at the back, among other issues. Eventually the tanks were handed over officially to the NZ Army with their turrets removed, given cannons had still not been sourced. General Puttick recommended that no more vehicles of this type be made and deemed the three tanks suitable for beach defence, should it come to that. So, the tanks were stripped of their armour and returned to civilian duties, waiting for the call to military service. This never came, the US entered the war and pushed the Japanese Empire back across the Pacific, to say nothing of the fact that better, faster and more ingenious designs became available with Valentine tanks being delivered from Britain and even the humble Bren carrier being produced locally. In saying that they never got the call though, it is reported that the third tank did see some military service in the Pacific theatre, albeit stripped of its armour and fitted with a bulldozer blade, so it wasn't really a tank.

To many, the tank is a colossal failure. From a technical stand point, you would be right, as mentioned it had a load of problems that made it terrible and had it dubbed "the worst tank ever built". But that wasn't really what it was about. Yes, the hope was to make a functional tank but it showed Aotearoa New Zealand and the wider world that we would not go quietly. Semple even said in October 1941, "That tank was an honest-to-God effort to do something with the material at our disposal when raiders were at our back door...instead of sitting down and moaning we felt we ought to do something to manufacture weapons that would help to defend our country and our people". Semple was never embarrassed or shied away from his attempt to make a tank. For example, in 1943 on the House floor he had the following exchange, "When we came into office we had insufficient strength to protect a currant bun from the attack of a blowfly. But if the Japs could be killed with wheelbarrows we could have stousted them – we had plenty of barrows...two years before the war we quietly slipped machines to Fiji and Tonga and built aerodromes there secretly... it was plain as the day that the Japs would strike south through the back door to Singapore... [island hopping] ...to New Zealand..what stopped them this way?" *A retort from the floor mocked Semple saying: "Probably your tanks, Bob" to which he responded "If that is a cheap sneer, you keep it. I had the vision to try and create something while a lot of others were just sniveling" [Laughter and applause to this response is recorded]*. In modern times this seems to have been shortened to "I don't see anyone else coming up with any better ideas", which really epitomises this story.

For all its failings and mockery, the Bob Semple tank was New Zealand's continuation of our attitude of Number 8 wire ingenuity, using what we had to build something that worked. It was a continuation of us punching above our weight on the world stage, pulling the middle finger to the world and saying "fuck you, come get some". To me, this is Aotearoa's version of Churchills "Fight them in the beaches" speech. The tank was our way of staring the full might of the Japanese Empire, arguably the most powerful empire the Pacific had ever seen, in the face, giving them a pukana, showing them that they could take our islands from our cold dead fucking hands.

After the war, Semple's support of conscription and later compulsory military service in 1948 bit him in the ass. His allies saw it as a betrayal but as he saw it as continuing as he always had as he viewed the spread of communism as a threat to the free world. He believed his precious trade unions were hiding them and allowing them more power and influence. He denounced communist union leaders and fought them openly. He even wrote a pamphlet called Why I Fight Communism, in which he warned the country to be on guard against the communist menace. Although, it is disputed as to whether he wrote it. Semple remained in Parliament after Labour's defeat in 1949, although he was

plagued by health issues for the last few years of his career, resulting in his retirement before the 1954 election. He died in January the next year, aged 82, survived by his wife, two daughters and two sons. Whatever you think of Bob Semple and his tank no one can argue that he didn't fight for what he thought was right. He was one of the most colourful and flamboyant characters of the early 20th century New Zealand labour movement, using his intelligence, get stuck in attitude and talent for rhetoric to get the movement political legitimacy and improve the rights and conditions of his fellow workers, which he did. He was not perfect, he was authoritarian, garnering himself many enemies among his allies and he did flip flop on issues such as conscription, not to mention that his tank didn't work and didn't see active service. Though it could be argued he is one of the critical figures in the beginning of the modern Labour Party, which is, at time of recording, in government and lead by the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, looking at making abortion and cannabis legal. His achievements, along with that of the First Labour Government helped shape Aotearoa New Zealand for the coming generations and helped build what we are today as a nation, trying to help those who can't help themselves. To finish, I think it would be best to sum him up using the words of Major General Robert Young, Dominion Commander of the Home Guard in 1940, "I am proud to be associated with him. He has for what I wish everyone had – a will to win the war – for when a man has got a will to win, nothing can stop him" Now you know why I call him Bobby "Big Nuts" Semple.

Honourable mention of Project Seal, a joint research operation between the US and NZ to make a bomb that could create a tsunami. Effective as Japan was an island nation. It was never completed though as we won the war before it could be made combat ready. The University of Waikato analysed declassified documents of the project in 1999 and found it would have been a viable weapon. These documents are now available to the public through Archives New Zealand in Wellington or Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archive in San Diego. It was also thought by some that the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami was created with a similar weapon.

Extra notes:

Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894 meant unions had to register and had the exclusive right to represent all their members in a particular job or industry. Made it Compulsory for employers to negotiate with these unions over disputes. First would be heard by a local board and if no agreement reached would be taken to national arbitration court, which made a decision that both sides were legally bound to accept. Court also had the power to set wages, this gradually ended up setting minimum wages and working conditions for certain groups. Strikes by workers or lockouts by employers were illegal when a dispute was being negotiated and once agreement had been settled. First in the world of it's kind, people from US, France, Britain Russia and others came to study the 'country without strikes'. This act and system would remain until 1970s.

Was initially successful, lots of new unions formed and wages and conditions improved but the cracks started to appear. Larger and more powerful unions didn't like being strangled by the lack of ability to strike, an extremely powerful tool in their kit. Employers didn't like leaving decisions of wages or working conditions to judges and then being legally bound to uphold them, instead of just relying on the free hand of the market. From about 1902, the Arbitration Court was bogged down with so many cases it could take a year to be heard. Increasing dissatisfaction saw a strike occur 12 years after the Act was passed (two tramwaymen stopped work for three hours after two members of their union were fired), which was successful (the men got their jobs back), leading to more strikes and show unions that striking was still the best way to get results.

The first major strike after this was the Blackball strike, in Blackball West Coast. Miners only got 15mins to eat their lunch and the manager wanted to increase the working day to 10 hours (may want to mention modern NZ legal working conditions) Union decided to strike to get more time for lunch and an eight hour day, as well as challenge the arbitration system. One day, a union leader refused to finish his pe when told his 15mins was up. He and six other men were fired causing the entire union strike, which ended up going for three months. The mining company eventually gave in and gave the men their jobs back and agreed to their demands, was a big blow to arbitration system and the impact was felt across the country.

The 1912 Waihi strike was conducted due to the gold-mine engine drivers (the guys who operated the lifts going up and down into the mines) broke away from the general union and made a new one, with the general union striking in protest (about 1000 workers). This eventually became violent, especially with W.F Massey (a known anti-unionist) sent in the police and the situation became violent. Eventually the strike-breakers who were hired to work instead of the strikers, attacked the union hall, resulting in the striker, Fred Evans, being beaten to death. The strike-breakers then ravaged across town forcing strikers and their families to leave. Fred Evans' death was justified by the police as they claimed he shot a cop.