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978-1-108-06200-8 - The Life and Work of Richard John Seddon (Premier of
New Zealand, 1893–1906): With a History of the Liberal Party of New Zealand
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Mr. Seddon's Birthplace, at Eccleston, near St. Helens, Lancashire, England.

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EARLY LIFE AND LIFE ON THE GOLDFIELDS

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together but also to walk hand-in-hand through life, everybody said that it was just what ought to have happened.

In that happy way, rivalry lapsed into love. Miss Lindsay closed her school, and Mr. and Mrs. Seddon took up their residence in the stone cottage on Eccleston Hill, which has just been described.

In that cottage Richard John Seddon was born on June 22nd, 1845, and there he passed his babyhood and his boyhood.

Richard, who was the second child, had three brothers and three sisters. He was a healthy, robust, muscular, and boisterous young lad, and he gave plenty of evidence at an early age of the wilfulness that became one of his characteristics when he entered the battlefield of colonial politics.

The most definite impression left upon him by his early childhood was that made by the funeral of the thirteenth Earl of Derby, when Richard was a sturdy infant six years old. The Earl was a great patron of science, having been president of both the Linnean Society and the Zoological Society of London, and he kept at Knowsley Hall a splendid natural history collection, which had an attraction for the boy, who often made visits to the park. When he heard of the Earl's death, his first thought was that those happy outings would now have to come to an end, and he was more sorry on that account than on account of the death of the great nobleman. His grandfather's family were tenants of the Earl, and that association made Knowsley Hall a kind of shrine as far as he was concerned. Every tenant attended the funeral, and every horse in the immense estate was brought into use for the procession. The sight struck the boy as being a most remarkable one. "Through all the morning," he remarked fifty years later, when he was sending his mind back to those days, "there came to me, even as a child, some knowledge of the deep affection that existed between the Earls of Derby and their tenantry, of which in riper years I have seen many demonstrations."

Another incident that made a great impression on him as a child was the march past of the Scots Greys on their way to Liverpool to embark for the Crimea. It seemed to him that the steady stream of men would never end.

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About that time Queen Victoria visited Knowsley, and the children of the local schools assembled there to sing the National Anthem in Her Majesty's honour. It was the first time he had seen Queen Victoria, and the feelings then engendered, and the impression created, lasted throughout his long life.

By-and-by the time came when he had to go to school. He was taken in hand by his father, whose wish it was that Richard should pose as a "possible" to other boys, to whom he was to be an example of diligence and application. Richard had other views in regard to himself, however, and he was determined that his opinion as to what he should do would prevail. Although he was caught early, therefore, he did not play the part at all well. His mind was out in the open, and books and papers had far less interest to him than the games of the playground.

Squire Taylor and the new Earl of Derby were trustees of his father's school. This fact enabled him to become well acquainted with their estates, and the familiarity that grew up in that respect certainly fostered, if it did not actually create, the love of all kinds of sports that soon seized upon him and carried him far from his father's school at times when he was supposed to be studying as only the son of the master could be expected to study. He was shrewd enough to maintain very friendly relations with the keepers of the domains on the two estates. With them, indeed, he made his first reciprocal treaty. They gave him freedom to do as much bird-nesting as his heart dictated, and he, on his part, promised not to interfere with the game in any way, a promise which he kept faithfully.

One day when he was in a reminiscent mood, he told a newspaper interviewer of an incident in his schooldays. "A herd of cattle," he said, "just landed from Ireland, was passing my home one day, and I was standing by the roadside watching them with childish interest, when one of the cows rushed at a younger brother, and might have injured him. I was beside him in a moment, and, pulling the child inside the gate, saved him from any possible danger. This little action must have seemed quite heroic to my mother, for it was a long time afterwards before any circumstances could dislodge me from the very agreeable position of first favourite.

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“I have another little story of the same period. After school one day I went to bathe in a neighbouring pond, got out of my depth, and was on the point of drowning. A brass band was passing when my sister gave the alarm, and one of the men came to my rescue. Her further cries brought a local quarryman, and, in the moment before I lost consciousness, I caught sight of these two men, one with his trombone, the other in a leather apron, and ever since I have always felt a particular partiality for all men who play trombones or wear leather aprons.”

One of the most exciting adventures of his youth came to him through an excess of curiosity, which tempted him to test the truth of the tradition that there was an underground passage between the old abbey adjoining his father's school and Scholes Farm.

The cross, then a great feature of interest in the grounds, stood near the playground, in which were piled many grave-stones huddled up from their former position, and while some of the inhabitants were planting flowers in that spot, one of the stones suddenly dropped well below the surface. That was regarded as proof of the existence of the subterranean passage, but to Richard the incident did not carry complete conviction. It was suggested that the hole should be filled up and the place should be left as it was, but he was of another mind, and started to explore with a spade. After a little time his labour came to a sudden end, for he unceremoniously disappeared, having dropped into one of the unknown abbey vaults.

The only branch of school work in which he took any particular interest was mechanical drawing, for which he once received the only first prize placed to his credit. In this way he showed where his desires and talents ran. It was mechanical engineering that captivated his fancy, and when he was still young he decided that the life of an engineer was the best thing for him.

When he began to be a big boy he was one of several who were taught extra subjects. It was an honour that he did not appreciate in the slightest. He asked himself why he should be kept inside the detested class-room learning Latin

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while his mates were outside in the glorious sunshine, playing at their games and enjoying themselves to the top of their bent.

The method of expostulation he adopted at last was a refusal to learn his lesson. There was a sharp battle, of course, but the issue was never in doubt. On that day, his grandfather happened to visit Eccleston. The position that had arisen, which was the talk of the household, was explained to the old gentleman, and it was agreed that the naughty boy should be taken away by him to the farm. There was no intention of sending him on to the land permanently, but it was thought that he would soon tire of country life, and would be glad to get back to Eccleston and his books.

He did soon grow tired of the country, and further conferences between the heads of the family led to an arrangement under which he was apprenticed to Messrs. Dalglish and Co., engineers and iron founders, of St. Helens. He was fourteen years of age then. Having served an apprenticeship of five years, at the end of which he was told that he had given his employers complete satisfaction, he was sent to the firm's Vauxhall Factory at Liverpool, where he evidently gave satisfaction also. Forty years later, when he returned to England as one of the Colonial Premiers at the King's coronation ceremonies, he saw the foreman of the Vauxhall factory, and asked him jocularly if he would give him a job, and the foreman replied in the affirmative. "He were a good 'un," he remarked to one of Mr. Seddon's friends; "and, if he likes to come back, I'll give him a job to-morrow."

Things were not to young Seddon's liking, however. He was restive, and he longed for change. He did not like the conditions under which the working classes in England had to labour. He saw skilled artizans, capable, sober, and industrious men, slaving ten hours a day for small wages, and he often felt keenly the oppression that took place all around him.

He listened eagerly to the stories of fortunes made in a few weeks in Australia. He was told that young men like himself went to Australia as poor as he was, and returned in a few years rolling in wealth. He tried to put thoughts of the great goldfields out of his mind, and to settle down to the vocation

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Mr. Seddon at sixteen years of age, when he served his apprenticeship to the engineering trade.

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which he had chosen, and which he was beginning to love as he became better acquainted with its intricacies and the possibilities that it offered.

But the golden dreams haunted him night and day, at work and at leisure. He scanned the newspapers for reports from Australia. The favourable reports sank deep into his mind; the reports of hardships and terrible deaths seemed to fade away as soon as he had read them. He argued, as hundreds and thousands had argued before and since, that, if fortune came to others, it was just as likely to come to him. He was a cheery, optimistic man all his life. He never took the gloomy view. He could not do so, in fact, and to the end of his days was looking forward with the hope and the certainty of getting something done. "My greatest interest," he said once, "lies in the to-days and the to-morrows, not in the yesterdays, with which I have done."

So he heard the Golden South calling to him; and, bidding friends and relatives "good-bye," he stepped on board the "Star of England," a handsome young man, fair in complexion, upright in carriage, and strong in build.

His capital consisted of a Board of Trade engineer's certificate, a pair of broad shoulders, a steady purpose, a determination to succeed, and a stout heart. These friends stood by him through life. It is to them that he owed a great deal of the credit for the things he did in the new land to which Fate was leading him, but which at that time had no place in his thoughts. He went to search for gold, but he was denied success in that direction in order that he might gain that which gold could not give.

At that time, however, it would have been impossible to shake the conviction in his mind that gold was waiting for him to pick it up from the Victorian goldfields.

Soon after he landed in Melbourne, therefore, he set out for the diggings. There he was quickly disillusioned. The paths were not strewn with nuggets. There were no paths at all, and nuggets gave very few signs of being more plentiful than at old Ecclestone in the England he had left. He worked hard and searched diligently; but in vain. He found himself poorer

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in everything except experience. The life was rougher than he had believed life among human beings could be, and the sights he saw on the goldfields were far more harrowing than those that had attracted his attention among the poor working classes of England. His optimism was tried as it had never been tried before; and it must be stated that the strain was too great. He broke down, and he went back to Melbourne to seek employment as an engineer. He found it in the Railway Workshops of the Victorian Government, at Williamstown. There he was engaged as a journeyman fitter. This was in the year 1864, and he was then nineteen years of age. He made friends with his fellow-workers, and some of them always had a place in his memory.

He was looked upon by the “hands” in the shop as a good tradesman and a first-class athlete. “He was always a politician,” one of his mates explained many years afterwards when Mr. Seddon was a conspicuous figure in the Empire’s affairs. “Whether it was an election for a member of the House or for a town councillor, he was always head and ears in it, and would be discovered by old Houghton, the foreman, addressing a crowd of men in one part of the shop or the other. Houghton always knew who it was, and would say: ‘Now then, no more of that!’ and Mr. Seddon would reply quite cheerfully, ‘All right, Mr. Houghton;’ but ten minutes later he would be propounding the principles of his favourite candidate to another crowd not very far away. On one occasion he was reported for this to the head of the Department, or the Minister, for the Government employees were not then allowed to take any active part in politics. In the case mentioned, his man got into Parliament, so that nothing came of it.”

His fellow-workmen frequently admired his great physical strength. He took a delight in feats that were likely to cause envy. The shop in which he worked was 200 feet long. On one occasion, he walked its whole length with a 56 pound weight strapped to each foot, a 56 pound weight in each hand, and a 28 pound weight held by his teeth.

There was a gymnasium attached to the workshops. It was used by the men in the evenings, and Mr. Seddon was one of the