Bro. Thomas Davies Mutch.
1885 - 1958
Journalist, Politician and Historian

MUTCH, THOMAS DAVIES (1885-1958), journalist, politician and historian, was born on 17 October 1885 at Lambeth, London, eldest child of William Mutch, Scottish omnibus driver, and his second wife Sarah, née Davies. He arrived in Sydney on 24 March 1887 with his parents and four half-brothers. Educated at Double Bay Public School, he left home and school after his mother died in 1899 and worked for four years in outback shearing-sheds. An enthusiastic reader, he absorbed socialist literature and the bush tradition. He was an executive-member of the Australian Workers' Union in 1903-17.

Returning to Sydney in 1903, Mutch joined the staff of the *Australian Worker* and met Henry Lawson. He tried to wean Lawson from drink, in 1910 camped with him at Mallacoota, Victoria, and Cape Howe, and in 1914 accompanied him on a pilgrimage to his boyhood home at Eurunderee. At Neutral Bay, Sydney, on 23 September 1912 Mutch had married a divorcee Edith Marjorie Hasenkam, née Coskerie.

In 1909 he had organized the Australian Writers' and Artists' Union, which in 1913 merged with the Australian Journalists' Association; he was president of the State branch and vice-president of the federal council in 1915-16.

A member of the State Labor central executive in 1913-17, Mutch was a delegate to federal Labor conferences in 1916 and 1918. A socialist visionary, stubborn with a burning sense of justice, he was regarded as a radical within the party. At its Easter conference in 1916 he was a founder of the 'Industrial Section' and was among the first to vigorously campaign against conscription.

In March 1917 Mutch was elected to the Legislative Assembly for Botany; Lawson told the electors that Mutch 'is the straightest mate I ever had'—even if he did take 'pyjamas in his swag'. He worked tenaciously for the release of Donald Grant and the other eleven imprisoned members of the Industrial Workers of the World. A member of the Unions' Defence Committee during the 1917 strike, he was put on a good behaviour bond for calling the police 'paid mental prostitutes' at a Domain meeting. In parliament Mutch soon made his mark as a vibrant speaker: his 'lithe form pulsating with nervous energy; the handsome features lit up by the dark eyes gleaming with merriment or with enthusiasm, or with anger'.

After visiting the United States of America with James Dooley in 1919, Mutch served as minister of public instruction and for local government from April 1920 to October 1921 under John Storey and continued until April 1922 in his education portfolio under Dooley. An able administrator, he contended with increased classes and chronic shortages of teachers, classroom accommodation and funds. He tried to get more Australian content into school curricula, abolished high school fees, caused a stir when he banned war trophies in schools, gave priority to technical education, and strove to improve educational opportunities in the country. He also reorganized the State Children Relief Department, creating the Child Welfare Department.

An alderman on Mascot Municipal Council in 1921-27, Mutch introduced Acts which established county councils and compulsory registration of architects. He also tried to establish a main roads board.

However, Mutch's ministerial achievements were obscured by the bitter faction fighting that convulsed the State Labor Party in the 1920s. In 1920 he and Dooley were exonerated by a royal commission into charges of bribery, made by Jack Bailey. Matured by the realities of office and leader of the Freemasons in caucus, Mutch gradually drifted to the right. In April 1922 he was defeated for the deputy leadership. In 1923 he remained stubbornly loyal to Dooley and castigated Bailey and the communists. On 27 June 1924 Mutch challenged J. T. Lang for the leadership and lost by one vote, thereby incurring Lang's enmity.

However, Mutch served in Lang's first ministry in 1925-27 as minister for education. He endured pinpricks from the premier and such severe cuts in loan funding that he was goaded into publicly criticizing Lang for starving his department. Lang ordered a secret inquiry by the auditor-general into the Child Welfare Department. In parliament Mutch vigorously defended his departmental officers and denounced the report. Lang blandly ordered a royal commission (which eventually exonerated Mutch and his department). The dissension in cabinet was intensified by the party's new 'Red Rules'; Mutch accused Lang of assuming dictatorial powers. On 27 May 1927 he was excluded from Lang's reconstructed ministry.

Losing pre-selection, he was expelled from the party and fought two vituperative election campaigns against R. J. Heffron during which he became involved in several libel suits. He held Botany as an Independent in 1927 but lost in 1930. Bitter at his treatment by Lang, Mutch was a foundation council-member of the All for Australia League in 1931 and, next year, found himself, somewhat uncomfortably, a member of the United Australia Party. Defeated for the Federal seat of Werriwa in 1934 and the State seat of Bathurst in March 1938, he won a by-election for Coogee in June. In the assembly he was caught up in E. S. Spooner's and other discontented back-benchers' plots against Premier (Sir) Bertram Stevens. Utterly disillusioned with politics he was defeated in 1941.

Unemployed after his defeat in 1930, Mutch led a hand-to-mouth existence thereafter as a freelance journalist, writing historical articles for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Bulletin*. From 1936 he also broadcast regularly for schoolchildren and from 1940 provided the Rural Bank of New South Wales with research for broadcasts. He was also an alderman on Randwick Municipal Council in 1931-37, a member of the Board of Fire Commissioners in 1936-54, and editor of the *Bulletin*'s 'Red Page' in 1936-37. Impractical with money, he was a director of several small companies and unsuccessfully speculated in mining and real estate.

Mutch had been a foundation member of the Henry Lawson Memorial Committee in 1922 and in 1933 published *The Early Life of Henry Lawson*. He became deeply interested in the voyages of the early Dutch navigators and secured the help of the Netherlands consul-general to procure and translate documents. In 1942 he presented a paper to the Royal Australian Historical Society on *The First Discovery of Australia with an Account of ... the Career of Captain Willem Jansz* (privately printed). He was elected fellow of the society in 1943 and was a council-member in 1943-47.

A professional genealogist, Mutch was a council-member of the Society of Australian Genealogists in 1945-46 and was elected fellow in 1946. He compiled a comprehensive index to the early settlers of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land from parish registers, convict indents, musters and land records; the 'Mutch Index' is now in the Mitchell Library. A trustee of the Public Library of New South Wales (1916-58) and a member of the Mitchell Library committee (1924-58), he secured Jansz's original charts for the library, successfully lobbied for establishment of the State Archives in 1942, and in 1945 persuaded the National Library of Australia to co-operate in a joint copying project of documents relating to Australia in the Public Records Office, London.

Tall and impeccably dressed in tailor-made suits, Mutch was attractive to women, but his addiction to work, desire for perfection and later crankiness placed great strains on his domestic life. He was divorced in 1927 and in Melbourne married a schoolteacher Dorothy Annette Joyce on 26 March 1928; they parted about 1955. Survived by his wife and their son and daughter, he died of cancer at his Clovelly home on 4 June 1958 and was buried in the Anglican section of Waverley cemetery after a service in St James' Church. The Society of Australian Genealogists established the T. D. Mutch memorial lecture in his honour.

Ref:: Martha Rutledge, 'Mutch, Thomas Davies (1885 - 1958)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986, pp 655-657.

Records of the UGL of NSW & ACT.

Thomas Davies Mutch was initiated, passed and raised in Lodge Kensington, No. 270 UGL of NSW & ACT on 10 June, 16 July and 23 September 1920 respectively.