

# The Curious Case of Bill Sutch's PhD

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## Abstract

How William Ball Sutch, with a reputation as a distinguished economist, achieved his doctorate at Columbia University in a remarkably brief period of time and by researching a New Zealand topic in New York is an intriguing question which the author sets out to investigate.

The reputation of William Ball Sutch as a distinguished economist and public intellectual stems in large part from his having earned his doctorate at a prestigious Ivy League university, Columbia in New York. The degree propelled him into a high-ranking career in government, at a time when very few public servants of his generation had such a qualification. Yet there are two aspects to this PhD that have long intrigued me: first, he appeared to have acquired it in a remarkably brief period; and second, that Manhattan in 1931-32 seems an unlikely base to research Price Fixing in New Zealand, the title of his dissertation. I finally decided to look into it further, and when my daughter was studying at Columbia recently I enlisted her assistance in doing a bit of detective work.

My PhD at an American university (Northwestern), earned after I had gained an MA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, took me three years: a year of intensive course work culminating in a three-day "prelim" exam, and then two years of research and writing. At the time I did it, the 1970s, that was pretty much the minimum. A bit of research revealed that Sutch enrolled for his PhD, armed with a University Fellowship, in September 1931, and was awarded the degree on 1 June 1932<sup>1</sup> – that is, in under nine months. Were doctorate requirements at Columbia in the 1930s that much less rigorous?

At the time he was awarded the fellowship, Sutch (born 27 June 1907) was 23, "the youngest man in New Zealand to hold the degrees of both MA and BCom", as the press reported.<sup>2</sup> He had packed a lot into his short life. Educated in the capital at Brooklyn School, where he was dux, and at Wellington College, he went on to study at both Wellington Teachers' Training College and Victoria University College (VUC). He graduated with a BA (1927), MA with 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Honours in Economics (1928), and BCom (1931). His student activities included being a champion debater. "To finance his studies," Sutch's biographer Brian Easton tells us, "he worked as a telegraph delivery messenger, newspaper vendor, farm labourer, builder's labourer and grocery assistant."<sup>3</sup> A keen sportsman, Sutch played senior hockey and rugby, and in 1927 was the winner of the national One-Mile Walk Championship.<sup>4</sup> [One wonders if he was the "Bro. Sutch" who won the Men's Walking Race (backwards) at the Druids' Picnic in Wellington in January 1928.<sup>5</sup>]

Much of Sutch's study for the Commerce degree must have been undertaken extramurally, since from early 1928 to August 1930 he was teaching at Nelson College<sup>6</sup> (where according to the SIS his nickname was "Greasy"). He had something of a military bent, and in November 1928 was commissioned 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Territorial Force. His cultural interests came to the fore in 1930, when he was elected leader of the newly-formed Workers' Educational Association (WEA) circle in Nelson. Every two weeks he presided over sessions devoted to opera (Verdi and Puccini), art (William Morris, Burne-Jones, Turner), and drama (Ibsen, Stanley Houghton, Arnold Bennett, Shakespeare). He was a leading figure in the play readings, and as Bernick in Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*, "Mr Sutch made the character real."<sup>7</sup>

From September 1930 to August 1931 Sutch taught at Wanganui Technical College. In the river city he took up rowing and participated in the school's dramatics – for the production of *Julius Caesar*, “Mr Sutch ... carried out the duties of prompter in a most efficient manner.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the widely held suspicion that in later life Sutch acted as a Soviet agent, it is intriguing that in June 1931 he addressed the Wanganui Rotary Club on the subject of Russian Communism. The talk, whose content is reported at length in the *Wanganui Chronicle*, is a somewhat bizarre mishmash of ideas which nevertheless indicates the fascination which the USSR was beginning to hold for him. The “Russian culture, or Bolshevism,” Sutch told the Rotarians, “rests on the denial of the rights of the individual ... the State is everything.” He warned them against believing rumours of Russian terrors, but admitted that the revolution's cost in “human blood, sacrifice and suffering ... still continues.” Much of his talk centred on the functioning of the socialist economy and labour conditions. “It is probable that the standard of living in Russia will never reach a level of luxury such as that attained by most New Zealanders,” Sutch predicted, but “such a high standard would be repugnant to the spirit of Communism.” And while it was true that “academic freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of thought” were forbidden in the Soviet Union, it was not to be forgotten that the workers were not interested in “free speech” and “probably feel that they are deprived of very little freedom.”<sup>9</sup>

The award of a fellowship to Sutch was announced in May 1931. “Columbia University,” it was explained, “awards a few fellowships annually to university graduates of any country who have shown particular ability to pursue courses of higher study and original investigation.” The appointment was for one year, with a stipend of £360 (\$1800).<sup>10</sup> “A potent factor in his securing the fellowship, the *Otago Daily Times* surmised, was his MA thesis, “as the examiner, Professor Clay, Manchester University, classed it as the finest thesis submitted by New Zealand students”. (It is puzzling that given this verdict Sutch should have received only 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Honours – perhaps his course work for the degree was not up to standard.) At Columbia, Sutch would “specialise in work in the faculties of political science and of philosophy, doing research work along price and labour conditions in the eastern States”.<sup>11</sup>

The fellowship recipient, it was reported, was to sail from Auckland on 25 August aboard the *Niagara*, presumably to proceed overland from Vancouver to New York.<sup>12</sup> He would have arrived in September; classes started on the 24<sup>th</sup>. There is little information available about where he stayed and whom he associated with during his time in the United States – the intelligence agencies were certainly interested, but gleaned nothing.<sup>13</sup> Letters to his mother from this period which might shed some light on the subject are deposited at the Alexander Turnbull Library<sup>14</sup>, but access is restricted and my request to view them was denied.

There is however evidence of the development of Sutch's political thinking in an article he wrote for the *Dominion* in December 1931. In “New York To-Day” he describes the thousands of unemployed sleeping rough – “it is impossible to forecast how many of them are to survive this winter” – while office blocks and apartment buildings remain half empty. “The United States is still in the stage of economic development first formulated by Adam Smith,” Sutch contends. “Let every man pursue his own interests, for heaven's sake don't let the Government interfere, and society will be benefited.” The present state of New York City shows how much benefit has accrued from this policy.”<sup>15</sup>

Given the clear leftwing orientation of this article, it would be fascinating to discover if Sutch came in contact with Donald Henderson, a prominent radical activist on the Columbia campus. A Communist Party member, Henderson was a PhD candidate and Instructor in Economics who in March 1932 was one of the leaders of a National Student League deputation aiming to get to Harlan County, Kentucky, in support of striking miners. The students were brutally turned back en route, and Henderson headed to Washington to appeal to Congress to protect civil liberties.<sup>16</sup>

But Sutch was at Columbia to study for his PhD. The Department of Economics was part of the Faculty of Political Science, and the Faculty's *Bulletin of Information* for 1931-1932 lays out the requirements for the qualification, including residence, examinations, course work, and dissertation.<sup>17</sup> The residence requirement is two academic years of graduate studies, one of which may be spent "at an institution accepted as offering courses of similar standard" to Columbia. Sutch's study at VUC for his MA may have been accepted under this clause. Various examinations are stipulated, including a preliminary examination prior to the research and writing of the dissertation; one can only assume that Sutch sat and passed these.

The course work requirements in Economics are 30 points (10 courses) in a select range of topics. In the Vita to his dissertation, Sutch states that he attended seminars conducted by professors H. Parker Willis, J.M. Clark and J.W. Angell.<sup>18</sup> Distinguished figures in their fields, Willis gave classes in money and banking, Angell in international trade and currency, and Clark in social economics.<sup>19</sup>

Sutch would necessarily have enrolled, in both Winter and Spring Sessions, in the Seminar in Political Economy and Finance, since it was compulsory for all Economics PhD students.<sup>20</sup> The lecturers in this team-taught course included, in addition to Angell and Clark, two who are of interest in relation to Sutch's left-leaning politics. Vladimir Simkhovitch, Professor of Economic History, was the author of *Marxism versus Socialism* (1908) and his courses included "History of Socialism" and "Marx and Post-Marxian Socialism". Leo Wolman, Professor of Economics, had previously been director of the Research Department of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. An authority on the history of American trade unions, Wolman taught "Economic Aspects of Industrial Relations" and "Unemployment".

When it comes to the dissertation requirements for the PhD, there are a number of stipulations. The Faculty Requirements state the need for "original researches on some approved topic". The candidate's "investigations and researches may be pursued either in connection with the work of some research course or under the direction and supervision of some member of the Faculty independently of any course"; in either case, "a very considerable part of the time of the candidate ... should be devoted to work upon his dissertation". The specific requirements for the Economics PhD state that "before applying for the preliminary examination candidates must ... secure the consent of the professor under whom they propose to write their dissertation".<sup>21</sup>

It is very difficult to see how Sutch's dissertation could have fulfilled these conditions. *Price Fixing in New Zealand* has nothing to do with the research he announced he would undertake, on price and labour conditions in the eastern United States. He handed it in in March 1932, six months after enrolling in the PhD programme, during which time he had a full workload of courses. Remarkably, the dissertation contains no acknowledgment of a supervisor or committee under whom the research was conducted (although Professor Clark is thanked for reading the proofs).<sup>22</sup>

And then again, how could primary research into New Zealand government price controls be conducted in New York at this time? Realistically, it could only be carried out in Wellington, as in fact Sutch implicitly acknowledges. In the Preface, he thanks the Secretary of the Department of Industries and Commerce for the loan of out-of-print Annual Reports, and the Secretary of the Meat Producers Board for information supplied. Both bodies were, of course, Wellington-based.<sup>23</sup>

The inescapable conclusion is that the research, and very likely the writing, must have been undertaken prior to Sutch's stay in New York. This takes us back to 1927-28, when Sutch was last in Wellington for any extended period of time. It was then that he was writing his MA thesis, the one which was highly regarded by Professor Clay. The title of this thesis, which one can learn from press reports, was *Government Price Control in New Zealand, 1914-1926*.<sup>24</sup>

The thesis was apparently supervised by Professor B.E. Murphy at Victoria and D.O. Williams, head of the economics section at Massey Agricultural College.<sup>25</sup> A copy is not held in the VUW Library, nor can the librarians locate any holdings of it elsewhere. Hence a direct comparison with the PhD dissertation is not possible. However it is reported that it "embraced a history of price control from early Greek times to the war and post-war periods, dealing intensively with the Government's commandeering of New Zealand commodities, such as butter, flour, groceries, etc."<sup>26</sup> *Price Fixing in New Zealand* commences with a reference to Diocletian in 301 A.D. (a Roman, not a Greek) and has chapters devoted to the control of prices of sugar, butter, timber, wheat, and other commodities including footwear, petrol, potatoes, coal, milk, bacon and ham, and groceries.<sup>27</sup>

The Columbia professors might have been open to Sutch's revising, building on and updating his MA research, but there is no evidence that this occurred. There is no mention in the dissertation's Preface of an earlier version, while in the text, tables of statistics end in 1926. The Bibliography lists just two items published after that year, one of which, J.B. Condliffe's *New Zealand in the Making* (1930) is quoted in the text.<sup>28</sup> My suspicion is that, with only very minor discrepancies, *Government Price Control in New Zealand, 1914-1926* and *Price Fixing in New Zealand* are one and the same. Unless Sutch's MA thesis turns up we cannot know for certain one way or the other.<sup>29</sup>

The dissertation was printed, and in what was virtually a facsimile edition, published as *Price Fixing in New Zealand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932). This seems to have been standard practice: Sutch's book was No. 371 in the Faculty of Political Science's series Studies in History, Economics and Public Law.

The book reached New Zealand, where reviews were favourable. It was "a work of interest and value," wrote the *New Zealand Herald*. "It is valuable as a sidelight on New Zealand history and it fills a gap in the literature on the world's experiments in price fixing. ... Dr. Sutch has done the work thoroughly in very moderate compass. Facts predominate. The comments are no more than have been justified by the passage of time, and they are moderate – even judicial – in tone."<sup>30</sup> Professor Allan Fisher argued that *Price Fixing* was "a timely and useful contribution to the task of understanding how an economic organisation works when the free play of competitive forces is in part controlled by authoritative price determination." Sutch had "brought together in his book a large amount of useful information about price fixation in New Zealand which has not hitherto been readily available anywhere." Although the author was "indeed not entirely successful in correlating at every stage the general argument which he

develops on the principles and limitations of price fixation with the details of the numerous experiments which he describes ... the book is certainly one which no serious student of New Zealand economic history can afford to neglect.”<sup>31</sup> Amusingly, the *Waikato Times* assumed that Sutch (credited on the title page as “University Fellow in the Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University”) was American, and titled its notice “As Others See Us”.<sup>32</sup>

In the United States, where readers were understandably less interested in empirical New Zealand data, the response was lukewarm. “No new theories or principles are indicated by the study, but the reader will find in it many interesting illustrations of how economic forces operate under certain control measures,” declared *The American Economic Review*.<sup>33</sup> “As a help in our present economic straits,” *The Journal of Business of the University of Chicago* contended, “*Price Fixing in New Zealand* is unsatisfactory because (1) it deals only with problems arising out of the World War and the readjustment immediately following, when the difficulties were of rapid enhancement of prices due to demand far outrunning supply, and (2) it tends to be explicit on the specific problems of that period and the measures taken to meet them rather than treating price fixing in its broader and more applicable phases.”<sup>34</sup> The most negative critique came from the *Yale Law Journal*, which opined that “the volume leaves much to be desired. In the first place, the author’s presentation of much of the factual material is so loosely organized as to result in a lack of clarity.... Furthermore, the author evidently does not perceive that, due to the breakdown of the competitive system, price-fixing and control of production and distribution might become necessary. As a consequence, his observations on the general desirability and necessity of government control of industry fail to be convincing.”<sup>35</sup>

Dame Margaret Clark enrolled for her PhD in political science at Columbia University in September 1969. The man in the scholarships office looked through her papers, saw she was from New Zealand, and said, “I hope you’re not like the other one we had.” He told her that when she completed her dissertation she would be asked to sign a form that would be bound in with it, with three clauses:

- 1) this is all my own work
  - 2) where I have used the work of others I have acknowledged it
  - 3) this thesis has never been presented at any other university.
- Clause 3 was known as “the Sutch clause”.<sup>36</sup>

Given the published requirements for the degree, there can be no doubt that candidates for the PhD in the Faculty of Political Science at Columbia University in the 1930s did not generally attain their qualification in a mere nine months. Nor would it have been standard for students to present a dissertation which had not been researched under Columbia faculty guidance and without a supervisor being credited. One can only hazard a guess at why Bill Sutch was permitted to wriggle around the regulations in this curious case. But it must be admitted that gaining two advanced postgraduate degrees on the basis of what looks like a single solid but not especially outstanding piece of research is quite a feat of fancy academic footwork.

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- <sup>1</sup> “Student’s Success: Mr. Sutch in U.S.A. - Awarded Ph.D. Degree”, *Dominion*, 29 June 1932, p 8.
- <sup>2</sup> “Economic Research”, *Auckland Star*, 29 May 1931, p 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Brian Easton, “Sutch, William Ball 1907-1975”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 Jun 2007. URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>
- <sup>4</sup> “Athletic Sports”, *Sun* (Auckland), 16 Aug 1927, p 13.
- <sup>5</sup> “Druids’ Picnic”, *Evening Post*, 3 Jan 1928, p 16.
- <sup>6</sup> The college’s 1928 Annual Report notes that Sutch was appointed to replace Mr Boulton, who left during the first term. “Boys’ College Annual Report”, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 14 Dec 1928, p 5.
- <sup>7</sup> *Nelson Evening Mail*, 2 Apr 1930, p 3; 9 Apr 1930, p 7; 23 Apr 1930, p 8; 7 May 1930, p 5; 2 Jul 1930, p 9; 16 Jul 1930, p 8; 31 Jul 1930 p 3; 13 Aug 1930 p 2. On the Shakespearean evening, “two short plays on New Zealand life by New Zealand playwrights” were also read and discussed.
- <sup>8</sup> “Play Supper”, *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 May 1931, p 2.
- <sup>9</sup> “Russian Communism”, *Wanganui Chronicle*, 16 Jun 1931, p 5.
- <sup>10</sup> “Economic Research”, *Auckland Star*, 29 May 1931, p 3.
- <sup>11</sup> “Columbia University”, *Otago Daily Times*, 17 Jun 1931, p 2. Henry Clay was Professor of Social Economics at the University of Manchester and an economic adviser to the Bank of England. He was knighted in 1946.
- <sup>12</sup> “Personal Items”, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 19 Aug 1931, p 4.
- <sup>13</sup> See NZ SIS, *W.B. Sutch – Target Assessment*, 30 May 1974, declassified 15 May 2008, Part III, 5A: “Although SUTCH first came to security notice because of his travels through the USSR in 1932, there is no record of his contact with any particular individual in that country, nor are we aware of his associates at Columbia University in 1931-32.” And MI5 file KV2/3930, Minute 138, P.F. Stewart, 4 Sep 1963: “SUTCH took his PhD at Columbia round about June 1932, and the Bureau might be asked not just generally about SUTCH’s contacts in New York, but specifically whether Columbia means at all to them what Trinity, Cambridge means to us.”
- <sup>14</sup> MS-Papers-6766-1, MS-Papers-6766-2.
- <sup>15</sup> “New York To-Day”, *Dominion*, 31 Dec 1931, p 7.
- <sup>16</sup> See e.g. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (Basic Books, 1984), pp 310-311, and Hal Draper, “The Student Movement of the Thirties: A Political History”, Marxists’ Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1965/xx/student30s.htm>, accessed 17 Mar 2025. In 1933 Henderson’s dismissal from his Instructor position for allegedly political reasons became a *cause célèbre*.
- <sup>17</sup> *Columbia University Bulletin of Information: History, Economics, Public Law, and Social Science; Courses Offered by the Faculty of Political Science for Winter and Spring Sessions, 1931-1932* (Columbia University, New York, 13 Jun 1931), 12-14, 41-43, 49-50.
- <sup>18</sup> William Ball Sutch, *Vita, Price Fixing in New Zealand* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1932), p 165. Sutch curiously claims to have been a “lecturer in Economics” at Nelson College.
- <sup>19</sup> Courses that Sutch may have taken include “Money and Banking”, “Banking and Banking Systems”, “Banking and Credit”, “Money and Currency”, “History of Monetary and Credit Theory”, “Banking Seminar” (Willis); “International Trade”, “Present-Day Problems in Currency and Credit” (Angell); “Foundations of Social Economics”, “Dynamics of Value and Distribution”, “Social Control of Business”, “Problems of Overhead Costs” (Clark); “Seminar in Social Control in Economic Life” (Clark and Assoc. Prof. R.L. Hale).
- <sup>20</sup> *Columbia University Bulletin of Information*, p 41.
- <sup>21</sup> *Columbia University Bulletin of Information*, pp 13, 14, 50.
- <sup>22</sup> Preface, *Price Fixing in New Zealand* (PhD dissertation), p 7.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> “Columbia University - Fellowship Awarded”, *Otago Daily Times*, 17 Jun 1931, p 2. See also “University Fellowship”, *NZ Herald*, 29 May 1931, p 10. A.M. Endres, in “The Political Economy of W.B. Sutch: Toward a Critical Appreciation” refers to the thesis as “Commodity Control in New Zealand”. He does not cite from it nor list it in his Selected References. *New Zealand Economic Papers* 20:1 (2009), pp 17-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00779958609544105>.

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<sup>25</sup> “In directing him in his studies, Mr Sutch owes much to Professor B.E. Murphy and to Mr D.O. Williams, head of the economics section in Massey Agricultural College.” “Personal”, *Otago Witness*, 23 Jun 1931, p 33. Murphy’s awareness of the metamorphosis of the thesis he supervised may have been a factor in Sutch not being appointed to a Chair of Economics at the University of New Zealand,

a position for which he was being considered, “because of numerous reports which indicated flaws in his character”. NZ SIS, *W.B. Sutch – Target Assessment*, Part II, 3(a).

<sup>26</sup> “Columbia University - Fellowship Awarded”, *Otago Daily Times*, 17 Jun 1931, p 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Price Fixing in New Zealand* (PhD dissertation), pp 9, 11, 121-131.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 61, 157-161.

<sup>29</sup> A new addition would have been charts drawn by “Miss Margaret Dunne of the Irving Trust Company, New York”. Preface, *Price Fixing in New Zealand* (PhD dissertation), p 7.

<sup>30</sup> Anon., “Price Fixing”, *NZ Herald*, 10 Jun 1933, p 9 (Supplement).

<sup>31</sup> Allan G.B. Fisher, “The Dominion’s Experiment”, *Press*, 21 Aug 1933, p 11.

<sup>32</sup> “As Others See Us”, *Waikato Times*, 20 Dec 1932, 11.

<sup>33</sup> O.C. Stine, review of *Price Fixing in New Zealand*, *American Economic Review* 23:2 (Jun 1933), pp 311-313.

<sup>34</sup> Wm. H. Newman, review of *Price Fixing in New Zealand*, *The Journal of Business of the University of Chicago* 6:4 (Oct 1933), p 354.

<sup>35</sup> Anon., review of *Price Fixing in New Zealand*, *Yale Law Journal* 42:3 (Jan 1933), p 470.

<sup>36</sup> Emeritus Professor Margaret Clark, personal communication, 24 Mar 2025.