

## Major James George Semple Lisle and his Wives

Revised and enlarged version by

Christina Backman 2018

James George Semple was the most notorious swindler and con-man in late eighteenth century Britain. Three contemporary books relating his adventures have long been rareties but now, thanks to the Internet, they are again available. *The Northern Impostor*, a compilation of his many misdemeanors mainly in money matters, was published in 1786 by George Kearsley while Semple still stood in the dock at the Old Bailey. It is highly unfavourable to him, and ran to at least nine editions. *The Life of Major J.G. Semple Lisle* published in 1799 and reprinted in 1800, appears to be autobiographical, though, according to Smollett, probably written with the help of a ghost writer. The 382 pages concentrate more on his supposed fighting exploits and his constant travelling than on his financial affairs. The third volume, *The History of the Swindling and Amorous Adventures of James George Semple*, published in 1795, concentrates unfavourably on his military and amorous affairs and publishes his letters to the Duke of York before thoroughly analysing them by numerous “reliable witnesses”. Today Semple’s adventures as a convict on board the *Lady Shore* bound for Australia and his experiences in Brazil captivate public interest much more than his flamboyant and doubtful relations with the great men of his time and the women he charmed and cheated.

Semple claims to have been born c. 1759 (or possibly late in 1756) in Irvine, Ayrshire, Scotland where his father was an excise-man. Impossible to keep at school or in the neighbourhood, James George started his chequered career as a soldier of fortune and was shipped off to fight in America. Returning to England in 1777, the handsome, pleasant and very articulate youth embarked on an agreeable life – at others’ expense. At Bath and later in Lille one of the young man’s earliest conquests was the well-known Mrs Gooch, a young lady of Jewish extraction but with a very dubious reputation, who was fooled out of her fortune by her estranged husband. Sent to France, totally ignorant of the language and living alone, she was suddenly accosted by Major Semple, who apologised for his visit and intrusion, enumerated his English acquaintances at Lille, proffered her his services and did not leave her until he had obtained her permission to drink tea with her that same evening. “I was pleased to hear an English voice, and I continued to receive Mr Semple’s visits for some weeks on the footing of a slight acquaintance, but nothing more,” she explains in her autobiography.

They both returned to London and like Mrs Gooch, Semple was now penniless and, like her, he needed a profitable occupation.



A soldier's life seemed promising. Britain was for the moment at peace but on his way to the continent Semple met at Harwich "an amiable and accomplished young lady of a highly respected family," on her way "with her mother and sister to the Hague: with her I formed a connection of the tenderest nature." Elizabeth Gilbert's desperate parents offered to settle £200 a year on their daughter but "her passion was too great" and the marriage took place at St Clement Danes church in London on March 8th 1779.

Semple wrote "After sojourning some months in London, I went with my wife to France; where I was presented by her to the Duchess of Kingston," Elizabeth's godmother. She persuaded him to go to Russia, where the disgraced duchess, banished from England for bigamy and riotous living, was buying an estate outside Narva where she aimed to start producing vodka. At Danzig, young Elizabeth was left to make her own way to Narva with two heavy carriages while her husband hurried on to St Petersburg to bask, as "Lord Semple", in the glory of his new-found friend Prince Potemkin and to fight for anyone who would employ him. In reply to a piteous letter from his anxious wife, he endeavoured "to soothe the feelings which an amiable, virtuous, affectionate woman must naturally feel at the departure of the husband she loved and who doted upon her" as he expressed himself in 1799. The Duchess, out of malice, showed Elizabeth a letter showing Semple's military plans, and the final outcome was that his family were moved away from their compatriot the Duchess to a lonely life in Narva, while the major happily followed the army .

At the beginning of 1784, the war in Crimea was over and Semple brought his family to St Petersburg. However, the capital proved too expensive even for him and in the autumn of 1784 he was back briefly in England. In his autobiography there is no further

mention of his family. Kearsley, in *The Northern Impostor*, has a little more to say: “He has a wife whose character is irreproachable by whom he had two children. He abandoned her and took up with an unhappy woman, whom he has brought to ruin”. Mrs Semple appears on the Army’s Compassionate List of 1786. In view of her husband’s well-known persuasiveness, it is specified that she may only receive her money in person. Kearsley states that she lives in Calais where she ran a successful English boarding school. Andrew Offer has pointed out that their daughter Lucy Maria, born 1784 in Narva, eventually moved to Littleham near Exmouth. She died there in late 1861 as an “annuitant.”



After being caught for fraud, and forced to leave England, Semple, who now called himself “Colonel” or even “Lord Lisle”, travelled to and fro in Europe bragging about his military exploits and luring hard cash from the unsuspecting. When the French Revolution broke out he “helped” unfortunate women who had lost their husbands, and took care of their money. It is said that he betrayed these women to Robespierre and the guillotine. Paris became too uncertain for an English subject, so the Major moved to Holland. There, however, the English soldiers soon found that Lord Lisle was in fact the swindler Semple.

Semple now moved southwards where his reputation had not yet preceded him, still boasting about his military achievements and the famous people he knew. The following part of his life is based mainly on *The History of the Swindling and Amorous Adventures*.

At Hanau, on the way to Frankfurt, the self-styled important officer Semple Lisle was presented to the beautiful Mrs S- lately arrived and reputed to have £1000,000 of her own. "The Major's generous soul could not leave a divine angel like her in the hands of uncivilised Germans; his sword and his banker were both at her disposal." Having learnt that her father was a rich banker in Leipzig, Semple quickly proposed marriage and wished to obtain the father's consent in person. In great style "Lord and Lady Lisle" set off for Leipzig to arrange matters with Mr C\_, the lady's father, of the illustrious family of COLE. The happy pair then travelled through several of the most beautiful places in the area, staying long enough to be congratulated on their nuptials but avoiding any of the English. Suspicion was finally aroused, Semple's papers were seized and he and his wife were detained in prison. After six weeks Semple was released as there was nothing illegal in his documents.

Semple's lady friend had in the meantime obtained a divorce in Brussels, no problem as she was already married to quite another man. The two imposters had run out of luck and now were short of cash. Together with the lady's mother they returned to England, one as "Mrs Semple" and the elder as the major's mother in law. Who were the so-called Coles? The original Mrs Cole was a character in John Cleland's infamous erotic novel "Fanny Hill", originally published in 1746 and though banned in 1749, available in various clandestine editions. This Mrs Cole ran a first class brothel in Covent Garden and plays a major role in the book. Should the story in *The History of the Swindling* be remotely correct in listing the ladies' shocking misdemeanours, readers would easily have figured out the persons behind the pseudonyms.

The French Revolution saw Elizabeth Semple back in England. Cyril Aydon has seen an undated letter from her soliciting help from the elusive Semple with some small sums "now that the Peace [the Peace of Amiens 1802] gives me an opportunity of returning to Calais, and settling myself once more where by my own exertions I might live without being burdensome to anyone". Poor Mrs Semple, she had heard nothing from her husband since they parted in Narva in 1784 and all she knows of him is what scandal she can read in the newspapers. However, she is not without sympathetic help. In May 1802, a reading by the famous Mrs Siddons of *The Distressed Mother* is organized, the proceeds to go "for the relief of Mrs Semple, a respectable woman who unfortunately stands in need of friendly assistance." One hundred persons subscribed two guineas each, and Mrs Siddons kindly amused them two nights with dramatic readings. The whole of the subscription money is given to Mrs Semple." (*Ipswich News*).

The Major (using various surnames) and “Mrs Semple” continued their fraudulent lives and in London malicious persons were convinced that there was only one Mrs Semple. Indignant, Elizabeth Semple’s friends hastened to print a handbill which describes the two Mrs Semples, giving us a unique means of knowing what they looked like. A defrauded innkeeper of Bath and a London map-maker, recently robbed by the false “Mrs Semple”, were among the witnesses.

Mrs Semple is a remarkable tall and thin woman, very fair complexion, light eyes and eyebrows, and flaxen hair; the DAUGHTER of MRS COLE, is as remarkably short, and rather thick, a very dark skin and complexion, large black eyes and eyebrows, and very dark hair; her connection with the major is not recent... Besides the above contrast, that between Mrs COLE and Mrs Semple’s Mother, is as extraordinary but for interested views to cast the Odium upon the Innocent (a favourite talent of the ladies) they have represented the deceased MOTHER of Mrs SEMPLE to be the person so vilely connected with the major.

The handbill is printed in the *History of the Swindling* where there is also a long and lurid account of Mrs and Miss Cole. Many details remind us of Mrs Gooch and her exploits, particularly as both ladies have rich and avaricious Jewish grandfathers living in Germany. It is difficult to see what is fact and what is fiction.

Shortly before 1795 the Major, now calling himself “Lisle” or “Semple Lisle”, courted a young lady from Richmond in Yorkshire. He meant to marry her but a “gentleman of London”, knowing his reputation, waited on the lady’s parents and prevented the match. Semple’s verses to her remain, however:

Forever, O merciless fair!  
 Will that cruel indifference endure?  
 Can those eyes look me into despair,  
 And that heart be unwilling to cure?

Major James George Semple was finally arrested at the beginning of 1795, tried and imprisoned in Newgate. He was sentenced to be transported to New South Wales and left Portsmouth on *The Lady Shore* in April 1797.



The long boat of the Lady Shore with Semple on board

His journey, his experiences during the mutiny, his stay in Brazil and in the Barbary lands as well as his return under arrest in 1799 to England, where he was locked up in Tothill Fields Brideswell, are all described in this important part of his biography. The style suggests he may have used the help of a “ghost writer” and there is no mention of any gallant adventures. In 1801 Semple was sent out of England to be exiled in France. He did not go alone.

The situation for French aristocrats who fled to Britain during the Revolution was often a very difficult one. In 1793 Antoine Campaigne de Boissimène brought his family to London. Born in 1733, he had been a captain in the service of France, in 1759 a major in the abortive Polish Republican army and had retired in 1785 as a lieutenant colonel with a small pension. In London, in 1795, at the age of 62, he points out that he had “served” for 48 years and tries to obtain a post with the Royalist French army. Money is very scarce and, like many of his compatriots, he opened a gambling joint and let his two young daughters serve wine to the customers. Was this where Major Semple met Sophie de Boissimène? No note of any marriage has as yet been found.

The local parish archives of Paris, and subsequently even the copies, were destroyed by fires, but in the Archives Nationales there is a very useful source from Napoleonic times, namely the daily reports of Joseph Fouché’s secret police, a summary of which has also been published and indexed. Both Major Semple and the Boissimènes appear there. Some of the facts given have obviously been misunderstood.

In 1801 Boissimène had, as a former officer, returned to Paris via Hamburg, with his daughters and with Major Semple, not because he was thrown out of England by Lord Portland for his wicked life, as Fouché states, but to save his French army pension. Semple seized the opportunity of tricking the Duke of Mecklenburg out of 50 louis – “I am an English colonel” –which helped to pay for the journey. Sophie and her father are the first to arrive in Paris, Semple came on 28 June 1801. A letter from Boissimène dated Paris 24 March 1802 notes: “It is 3 years since my daughter Sophie associated with the mentioned Lisle, a Scot; in my absence she had my consent to choose a husband. She came to join me here with two children and ready to give birth to a third when Lisle came from Frankfurt with a passport given him by Jackson” (the English agent). Six weeks later the Major was arrested and incarcerated in *le Temple* as a spy. Sophie was almost ruined by having to pay Semple’s keep in gaol. He was expelled from France and was back in London at the end of 1802. It is doubtful whether the two girls were really Sophie’s daughters or in fact her young sisters: Sophie Mathilde was baptised in 1797 and young Sophie Louise was born 22 February 1799 when Semple was still abroad and both are registered as Antoine de Boissimène’s children.

Semple Lisle was remarkable for all the travelling he did and there seems to be no doubt that he was indeed a secret agent or in fact a spy. In his letter to a Mr Stewart of 18 October 1804, recently sold in London, the Major, writing from a public house in Piccadilly is: “Begging to be allowed to offer his services to England as a spy or instigator of mutiny on enemy ships”. In 1805 there were rumours that Semple was again in Paris and Fouché was very keen to catch him.

Another child of Semple and Sophie has been fully identified, despite the misinterpretation of the names. It is Cesarine Antoinette Delisle, born in Paris St-Germain-des-Prés on 19 April 1805 and baptised there 12 June 1819, the daughter of “Louis Delisle” and Cesarine Louise Sophie de “Boissineur”. Perhaps the major really was in town. Cesarine, a “rentière”, died 5 June 1885 in Paris, unmarried.



Cesarine Antoinette, Paris 1863

Back in London again, Major Semple appeared in June 1807 at Worship Street public office, charged with defrauding two females, but was acquitted on a technicality. On 13 September 1813 Charles Hardie Semple Lisle was born in St Marylebone in London, the child of James George Semple Lisle and Anna Alton. There is nothing known of him or his mother.

The famous fencer, Henry Angelo published his *Reminiscences* in 1830 and the major is among the characters he portrays. Semple had already in 1777 cadged fencing lessons from Henry's father as well as obtruding his company on Henry himself, particularly at dinnertime. Many years later Angelo received a letter:

Sir, Having in a recent letter explained to you my situation, though you were at that moment absent, understanding that you are now in town and my miseries continuing in full force; let me now pray you to accord me the very little assistance then solicited, a few shillings. The sad urgency of my situation cannot be described; I am at this hour without a fire and without a shirt. I will only add that whatever is committed under a *sealed* envelope to the bearer will reach me, and that I am, with respect, your obedient servant I.G.S. Lisle.  
4<sup>th</sup>February 1811.

The fencer enclosed a crown and observes: "He took care never to appear *himself*, but had boys in different parts of the town to deliver his begging letters; and judging from the numerous letters he could send in one day, if they made any sort of impression, I should think he never could have been in want of a fire, or a shirt at all events, though perhaps he was obliged to forego his former luxurious way of living".

In December 1814 James George Semple, now in great distress, was found guilty at the Middlesex sessions of obtaining bacon and butter by fraudulent means. He was yet again sentenced to seven years transportation. This time too he escaped his punishment. Cyril Aydon has found the following in the Hull Packet newspaper, dated Tuesday December 19, 1815:

Deaths

On the 18th ult., at Lisbon, Major Semple. He went to bed the preceding night apparently in good health, and was found dead in his bed in the morning. He said he was on his way to Morocco; to which he had engaged to transport himself, on the Prince Regent's remitting the sentence passed on him at his last conviction.

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Should any reader have further news of the Northern Impostor's families, from 1795 until his death, it would be very welcome.