

The Gilruth Gazette

DARWIN December 16, 2018 Priceless

The Darwin rebellion 1918

Why are we here?

100 years ago (less one day), unionists and dissatisfied members of the public, including Darwin's mayor, marched on Government House to demand that the Administrator John Gilruth account for his actions.

A brilliant man academically, his term as the first Federal Government appointee to the position in 1912 was marred by his high-handed and often stubborn approach to managing staff, subordinates, the unions and the population in general.

Not long after his arrival, Administrator Gilruth cut field surveyors' wages and the Amalgamated Workers Union called a strike. Gilruth refused to negotiate, setting the stage for a bitter feud with the unions that would continue for the next five years.

Gilruth's nemesis was Harold Nelson, an engine driver who became the local organiser of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) after arriving in Darwin in 1914.

Nelson was a fiery campaigner and seized upon dissatisfaction with Commonwealth rule, especially the loss of the vote and the nationalisation of Darwin's hotels. His catch cry became "no taxation without representation!" with Gilruth as his constant target.

By 1917 almost 50 per cent of white Territory workers were AWU members and Nelson was on his way to becoming one of the most powerful men in the Territory.

From the archives ...

NT Times Dec 21 1918 - MELBOURNE, Thursday.

In the House of Representatives to-day, Mr James Matthews, referring to the riot at Darwin, said he had warned the Government there would be trouble through Dr Gilruth's arrogance and lack of discretion.

Minister for Home and Territories Mr Glynn said as far as he could ascertain the trouble arose through the increase in the price of bottled beer (laughter and dissent).

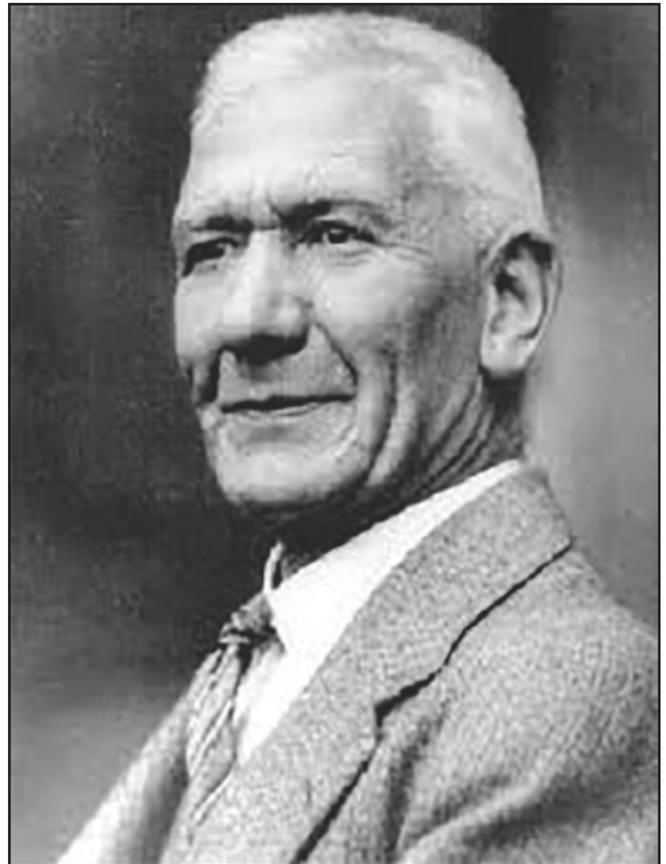
He said it was "hardly fair to found charges of mismanagement of the whole Territory on such petty matters".

Mr Glynn said he understood there was a serious disturbance on Wednesday, when a crowd, mostly Vestey's workmen, demanded a speech from the Administrator.

He was not familiar with the details, but understood one of Vestey's men knocked the Administrator down.

NT Times Jan 4, 1919 - MELBOURNE, Tuesday.

In a telegram sent by the Minister (Mr Glynn) in reply to a request by the people of Darwin that Dr Gilruth be recalled, the fact was emphasised that his appointment would 'terminate with the declaration of peace'.



John Gilruth ... brilliant, stubborn, arrogant.

The great beer strike

An issue that grated most with Darwin's workers, ringers and almost everyone else in the community was Gilruth's wartime measure to take over the hotels.

Resentment grew when bar staff took time off to attend the armistice celebrations and had their pay docked.

But when Gilruth upped the price of a bottle of beer from 1 shilling and 6 pence to 1/9, the unions slapped a very effective black ban on all government pubs.

The last straw came when a navy visit depleted supplies in all official and unofficial outlets and Gilruth refused to allow the unloading of a large consignment of Victoria Bitter from a freighter bound for Singapore.

The freighter left with the beer on board and the fuse was lit. Almost immediately, the rebellion was on.

With Gilruth all but confined to Government House while the Federal Government dithered about what to do, the beer arrived back in Darwin on the return trip.

It was unloaded, distributed to outlets, the black ban lifted and world returned to its axis.



From another angle ...

Charles Darwin University professor and historian, Alan Powell, in his book *Far Country* had a different take on the events of December 16.

By 1918 the unions, led by the charismatic Harold Nelson, had reached the peak of their power.

On 17 December 1918, up to 800 men marched from Vestey's meat works to Government House, calling for Administrator Gilruth to resign. A group invaded the house, manhandling Gilruth and causing minor damage.

Two months after the demonstration, the Commonwealth recalled Gilruth to Melbourne.

Nearly a year later, Nelson and another union deputation threatened three of Gilruth's former colleagues with rioting and violence if they did not depart immediately. They sailed the next day, concluding forever the Gilruth regime.

Twice, a hostile populace had forced officers of the Commonwealth from their posts.

None of the perpetrators were ever held to account. Gilruth by contrast faced a Royal Commission and was heavily criticised for his handling of the affair, though much of it was largely outside his control.

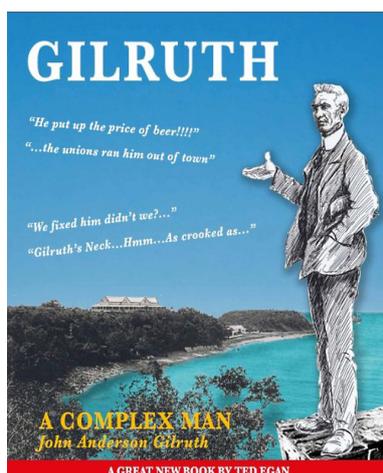
Referred to at the time as the "Darwin Disturbance", these events have since become known as the "Darwin Rebellion". They cemented the Territory's reputation (proudly for its inhabitants!) as a place of inherent unruliness.

Want more?

Author, singer and former Administrator Ted Egan has written a book about the controversial Gilruth.

Ted believes Gilruth was judged unfairly and was responsible for a number of good initiatives.

Check out the local bookstore or visit tedegan.com.au



The Darwin Rebellion through the camera lens

Top left: The marchers cross Knuckey St on their way through Chinatown in Cavenagh St. The "stone house" building that still exists today can be seen behind the building on the far corner.

Above top: This appears to have been taken as the workers milled around outside Government House before John Gilruth appeared in the gardens to speak to the protesters. This led to the workers breaking down part of the fence and manhandling the Administrator. Special constables attempted to defend him but Harold Nelson intervened and with some cool heads among Gilruth's protectors, managed to diffuse the impending riot.

Above: Harold Nelson addresses the workers, possibly outside or near to Government House. Nelson was a brilliant orator and when the Territory was finally granted a (non-voting) seat in the Federal Parliament, was elected to the position and served for many years.

Thank you

To all those who have given up their Sunday morning sleep-in to attend this significant Territory anniversary, thank you, and we trust you will continue to remember December 17 in future years.

Former administrators, lord mayors, union officials and more; this could not have happened without you.

To Ted Egan, Alan Powell and the many others who have taken the time and effort to record our history, we and future generations owe you an enormous debt.

And appreciation to the excellent NT Library archives for the photos which were sourced from the internet.

The culprits: Pat, Bruce & Jack.